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ABSTRACT

A study investigated linkages between adult community education (ACE) and mainstream vocational education and training (VET) in Australia, which enable people to move between the two sectors in their pursuit of vocational learning, and the ways in which linkages might be improved or new ones developed. The data from the study were derived from 69 surveys completed by ACE provider personnel; 383 surveys by ACE students, and a total of 68 interviews conducted with personnel from industry and the ACE sector in New South Wales and South Australia. The study found many strengths of ACE, including an informal and friendly learning environment; relaxed and supportive learning delivery; accommodations for diverse students; local management; flexible timetables, delivery modes, and course content; and personal interest of tutors. The study profiled existing linkages between ACE and VET and suggested the following strategies to improve them: (1) develop and improve guidelines, definitions, and procedures; (2) appoint designated linkage personnel; (3) provide training to ACE staff in pathways and linkages; (4) provide training to ACE staff in industry standards and practices; (5) collaborate and cooperate with mainstream VET; (6) structure ACE to complement mainstream VET; and (7) review existing linkages and develop new ones. Marketing strategies for ACE and VET also were developed through the study. (The report includes 23 figures, 10 tables, and 36 references. The survey instruments are appended to the report.) (KC)

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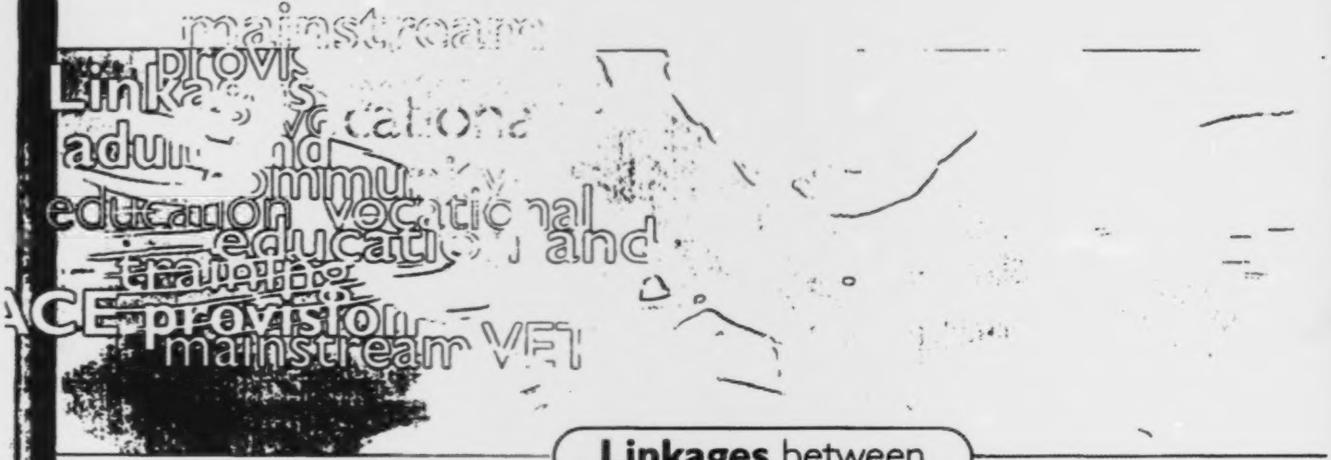
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John Saunders

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Executive summary

Objectives

The study was primarily designed to investigate and report on linkages between adult community education (ACE) and mainstream vocational education and training (VET) which enable people to move between the two sectors in their pursuit of vocational learning. The two most important aspects of linkages studied were the state of existing linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET, and ways in which they might be improved or new ones developed. The focus was predominantly on linkages that enable people to move from ACE to mainstream VET rather than from mainstream VET to ACE.

In examining the linkages, the research also touched on a series of other important related issues including:

- the awareness of industry, the mainstream VET sector and the community of ACE and ACE VET
- the attitudes of industry, the mainstream VET sector and the community to ACE provision of vocational learning
- ways in which promotion of ACE VET and ACE VET–mainstream VET linkages might be developed or improved
- implications, both for ACE and mainstream VET, of increased vocational provision by the ACE sector
- directions ACE providers might consider in relation to future provision of vocational learning

Methodology

The evidence upon which this report is based comes from three main contributing groups in New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia (SA). The first comprised ACE administration, management and teaching personnel engaged in providing vocational learning together with a number of representatives of ACE peak bodies and associations. People from this group were referred to as 'providers'. The second group comprised students undertaking ACE VET. The third group comprised industry representatives from employer associations, industry training advisory bodies (ITABs) and unions.

In all, 69 survey questionnaires were completed by ACE provider personnel (NSW: 43; SA: 23; not stated: 3); 383 questionnaires were completed by ACE students (NSW: 343; SA: 40) and a total of 68 interviews (NSW: 41; SA: 27) were conducted with personnel from industry and the ACE sector.

Key findings and suggestions

As well as presenting the key findings of this study, this summary also presents a series of suggestions for improvement to various aspects of ACE VET—suggestions relating to the nature and composition of ACE VET, how it is perceived, how it is promoted, pathways and linkages with mainstream VET, and working relationships between the ACE and mainstream VET. The suggestions are based on the survey results and the comments of project participants.

Strengths of ACE

There are many reasons why people choose to undertake vocational study with ACE rather than with mainstream VET. In some cases it may be because they do not possess the prerequisites for entry to a mainstream VET course, or because no places are available in the desired course. In others, it may be because ACE offers something special or different—something that distinguishes ACE VET from mainstream VET. Distinguishing features frequently identified by respondents in this study included the following:

- The ACE learning environment was informal and friendly, with a minimum of bureaucracy.
- ACE learning delivery was relaxed, supportive and less threatening, particularly for students who were apprehensive about study. Emphasis was on skills mastery rather than completion of courses in a set time.
- ACE had the capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of skills, needs and backgrounds.
- Being locally managed, ACE was generally better in touch with local needs of students and employers.
- Through its greater flexibility in timetabling, delivery modes and course content, ACE was better able to meet the needs of students and employers.
- In many instances, the tutor was responsible for the planning and development of a course as well as its delivery. This personal interest and 'ownership' of the course contributed to its quality.

These features were often perceived as the 'strengths' of ACE VET. ACE should strive to preserve and enhance them if it intends to extend and promote ACE VET.

Linkages and ACE–mainstream VET interaction

Established pathways supported by linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET are essential for students to reap maximum benefit from vocational study with ACE. They enable students to utilise their ACE learning as stepping stones to further study outside ACE. If credit or other recognition of ACE vocational study outside ACE is not available or difficult to obtain, the value and even the viability of ACE vocational study may be compromised. The following strategies, based on responses from providers, students and industry representatives in this study, are suggested as a means of developing or enhancing linkages between ACE and mainstream VET.

Develop and improve guidelines, definitions and procedures

Imprecise terminology and inconsistencies in procedures and their application in relation to ACE VET and its linkages with mainstream VET can reflect badly on the image of ACE and affect acceptance of ACE VET by industry and the mainstream VET sector. It is therefore suggested that ACE, in collaboration with mainstream VET, industry, students, and other parties concerned, should:

- clarify and standardise nationally the terminology used in connection with ACE VET including linkages and pathways
- develop and document guidelines and procedures to assist in the creation and accessing of linkages and pathways
- develop a register of existing pathways and linkages for the benefit of students and providers

Appoint designated linkage personnel

With increased provision of vocational learning by ACE there is increased potential for linking with mainstream VET. To capitalise on potential linkages for the benefit of students it is suggested that:

- designated personnel within ACE provider organisations be given responsibility and training to generally oversee linkages including: investigation and facilitation of their development; co-ordination and encouragement of provision of information to students on pathways and linkages; and provision of guidance on linkage issues to other teaching and administrative personnel
- consideration be given to the establishment of 'cluster co-ordinators' who would act on behalf of a cluster of providers in a region in facilitating development of linkages, disseminating information on linkages, and providing training and assistance to provider personnel in the implementation of procedures for accessing linkages

Provide training to ACE staff in pathways and linkages

Within ACE in particular, teachers provide assistance to students in completing many of the formalities involved in enrolling, undertaking and completing their courses. This assistance also applies to accessing pathways and linkages. Because it is important that the information and assistance provided by ACE staff to students be accurate and up to date, it is suggested that ACE staff likely to be involved in provision of information and assistance to students regarding pathways and linkages be given training in the procedures to be followed.

Provide training to ACE staff in industry standards and practices

Central to the success of pathways and linkages is acceptance by mainstream VET of ACE vocational training. To encourage this acceptance, ACE VET must conform to relevant training standards and ACE VET personnel need to have a sound understanding of industry and enterprise practices. It is therefore suggested that ACE VET personnel be given assistance and training, where needed, in: industry training standards, competency-based training, assessment design, teaching practices, understanding labour markets and working with enterprises.

Collaborate and co-operate with mainstream VET

Liaison between ACE and mainstream VET personnel can help to maximise the benefits obtainable from linkages. Close to three-quarters of providers and students consulted in this study saw a need for increased collaboration and co-operation between ACE and mainstream VET to improve linkages and co-ordination of vocational course provision across the two sectors. The following strategies, based on the responses and the ideas of project participants, are suggested to help achieve this:

- establish designated contact persons in ACE and mainstream VET organisations for the exchange of information on linkages and provision of assistance
- develop a combined ACE–mainstream VET peak body newsletter directed to providers in the two sectors focussing on co-operation and collaboration between the sectors and outlining changes and new developments relevant to pathways and linkages
- implement a system for prompt cross-sectoral exchange of new information on availability of vocational training which may have linkage potential, and the locations of providers through which it is offered
- conduct meetings, workshops and cross-sectoral visits between key ACE and mainstream VET personnel likely to be involved with linkages—the meetings to focus on exchange of information and development of ideas for pathways, linkages and other collaborative ventures

- arrange for mainstream VET lecturers to visit ACE centres to: meet ACE tutors; present an introductory technical and further education (TAFE) lesson to ACE students (to allay their fears about moving on to mainstream VET); and answer students' questions about linkages
- develop an 'active' referral system between ACE and mainstream VET which refers students automatically when needs cannot be met by one sector and an appropriate option exists in the other
- ACE and mainstream VET to investigate joint venture projects and funding where potential benefits exist
- co-locate ACE and TAFE providers on the same campus or in close proximity to each other where circumstances are appropriate

Structure ACE to complement mainstream VET

In their survey responses, providers and students were strongly in favour of ACE acting in a complementary role to mainstream VET—as opposed to a competitive role whereby it offered many of the same courses and outcomes. This perspective was based on the view that increased competitiveness could lead to: reduced co-operation from mainstream VET; changes to the special (and attractive) nature of ACE VET; and a reduction in traditional ACE management freedom, through becoming more dependent on government funding and more tightly bound by the needs of industry. To enhance ACE–mainstream VET complementarity ACE should:

- endeavour to maintain and enhance the distinctive and attractive styles of delivery which set ACE VET apart from mainstream VET
- increase the level of consultation between ACE and mainstream VET peak bodies regarding complementary vocational provision and linkages
- develop sharing of demographic information between ACE and mainstream VET so that demand can be more accurately determined and vocational provision can be planned to avoid duplication of effort and maximise options and other benefits for students
- provide vocational training in regional areas which mainstream VET finds difficult to service, either by acting as sole provider of particular courses, or by supervising training in the workplace, conducting assessments, providing tutoring and mentoring services, and assisting with distance learning as part of a partnership with mainstream VET
- act as a regional training broker and co-ordinator. While ACE may not always have the technical expertise or resources to teach a particular subject area, it does have the educational, organisational and entrepreneurial expertise to manage and co-ordinate learning, much of which can be in the workplace
- focus on provision of training in the workplace, an area some commentators felt mainstream VET (particularly TAFE) was not fully covering at present

Review and rationalise existing linkages, develop new ones

With many changes taking place in vocational training in recent times, and more to come, linkages between ACE VET, mainstream VET and industry training qualifications are in a state of flux. To ensure that linkages are kept up to date and new opportunities for linkages are not missed, ACE vocational learning provision should be mapped both against training packages and mainstream VET provision.

Promotion of ACE

Evidence from this study suggested that numerous individuals and organisations are disadvantaged by lack of information about the range of ACE VET available and the possibility of linking ACE vocational study with study in mainstream VET—potential vocational students of ACE may enrol with other providers in courses less suited to their needs, or may even refrain from enrolling at all; employers may fail to take advantage of ACE vocational training which could better suit their needs; and information, advice and assistance about ACE VET will not be available through ITABs, employer bodies and unions if these bodies remain uninformed of the VET capabilities of ACE.

Lack of information about some aspects of ACE VET was also seen to extend to ACE staff—almost half of the ACE providers who participated in this study rated ACE staff knowledge of ACE–mainstream VET linkages as *poor* or *very poor*. And, looking outside ACE, ACE providers saw mainstream VET staff as being largely unaware of the scope of ACE provision and the existence of linkages.

If ACE VET is to be used more effectively, it is important that the extent and quality of ACE vocational information provision to potential students, industry and other educational sectors be improved. To help accomplish this the following strategies are suggested.

General ACE marketing strategies

- Employ professional marketing consultants to advise ACE national and State peak bodies on marketing strategies to help develop and promote ACE generally as a capable and respected provider of vocational learning.
- Provide professional training in marketing strategies for selected ACE provider personnel.
- Employ a suitable high profile person to act as a figurehead for ACE in promotional campaigns in order to provide ACE with a readily identifiable public image. This should be undertaken on a State or national basis and utilised by local providers.
- Use the 'ACE' acronym and/or the words 'Adult and Community Education' in all ACE provider organisation names and include them in all ACE VET publicity so that the vocational learning ACE provides is recognised as coming from ACE.
- Provide ACE personnel with 'reader friendly' newsletters and information sheets on ACE provision and linkages. Where appropriate these publications might also be sent to other interested parties, such as linkage contact personnel in mainstream VET.
- Use the Internet (which can be accessed by large numbers of potential students, employees, employers and industry organisations) as a promotional medium. However, in keeping with the nature of ACE, information should be presented in a manner that is easily accessed and understood.
- Develop linkage-specific information and support networks for ACE personnel directly concerned with pathways and linkages. (ACE peak bodies already perform a networking function as part of their general role; however, it is thought that personnel directly involved in linkages might benefit from linkage-specific networks of their own).
- Avoid inundating industry bodies (ITABs, employer associations, unions) with information from too many sources. Generally these bodies would prefer a single, State-wide consolidated source of information.
- Include business enterprise centres in any promotional activities. These organisations, provide assistance and advice for the development of small businesses and therefore should be kept aware of the training options available from ACE.
- Consider the possibility that ITABs might act as training brokers.

Field-based marketing strategies

- Maintain a local focus of ACE VET (one of the 'strengths' of ACE) by fostering direct contact between local ACE providers and local businesses.
- Where feasible, establish an ACE presence in mainstream VET information centres (for example, an ACE brochure display and/or an ACE contact person present at enrolment times) so that applicants for whom mainstream VET is unsuitable can be more easily informed of ACE as an alternative possibility.

- Take into account the nature of the business when promoting to employers: for a small business, the contact person is likely to be the proprietor who will not have a background in training, whereas for a large organisation, it is likely to be a training manager or someone else with training knowledge. Communication should be styled to match the recipient.
- Seek to have ACE providers represented on local business associations.
- Use local government, which can be a central source of information to its community, as an avenue of promotion to the general public.
- Inform local Centrelink agencies of ACE VET—to enable them to pass on information about ACE vocational provision to customers, particularly those in need of vocational learning but lacking the confidence and self-esteem to embark on mainstream study.

Content of promotional material

- Draw attention to relevant 'strengths' of ACE (for example, ACE being informal, non-bureaucratic, friendly, supportive, able to meet special needs and locally managed) in all promotion of ACE VET.
- Place emphasis on the quality of ACE programs and the experience and professionalism of teaching staff in any information directed to mainstream VET, in order to engender confidence in ACE program results for which linkages are sought.
- Promote ACE VET as a friendly and supportive alternative—features which favourably distinguish it from mainstream VET.
- Use case studies in promotions and information provision to potential students, mainstream VET, and industry, to demonstrate that ACE can deliver to industry standards and is well suited to meeting special needs of organisations and individuals.
- Avoid references to 'soft skills' (which can have connotations of low academic level, lack of importance, lack of substance and technical irrelevance, all of which can be unfavourable to the image of ACE VET).
- Promote pathways and linkages by developing and distributing information to students, prospective students, current students and industry, on the concept of pathways and linkages, the linkages available, and the means of accessing them.
- Focus promotion to unions on programs of relevance to union activities, such as occupational health and safety (OH&S), leadership, communication, negotiation and management, rather than technical skills.

Strategies to encourage mainstream VET awareness

Strategies which could encourage greater mainstream VET awareness of ACE VET can be found in the earlier section of this summary focussing on improving collaboration and co-operation between ACE and mainstream VET.

Future directions in ACE VET

To obtain guidance regarding future provision of ACE VET, the views of ACE providers, ACE students and industry representatives were sought regarding directions ACE VET should take. The following is a summary of their views.

Vocational areas

In order for ACE to link vocational learning with mainstream VET, it is important that it provides learning relevant to that offered by the mainstream providers. One obvious aspect of relevance must be the choice of subject area. If linkages are to occur, the choices available to students must provide scope for continuity from one sector to the other. ACE providers therefore need to ensure that ACE VET course content is compatible with that of mainstream

VET. In addition to ensuring compatible course content, ACE also needs to ensure that course delivery and assessment are of a standard acceptable to mainstream VET.

In the context of establishing linkages with mainstream VET, the following vocational areas were suggested as being particularly appropriate for provision by ACE:

- word processing, keyboarding and other computer-based skills
- entry-level training/introduction to VET
- management and office training
- information technology

Personal skills and attributes

Communication, report writing, negotiation, leadership, confidence, and other personal skills and attributes are highly valued by employers considering applicants for employment. They were also commonly cited as important components of ACE VET provision. Because, in the eyes of many respondents, these competencies do not feature strongly in mainstream VET, ACE should ensure that they continue to be incorporated in its vocational programs where applicable and where appropriate, are taught as separate programs in their own right.

Type of training

Any determination of future vocational provision by ACE needs to take into consideration the types of training it should offer. Results of this study suggest that ACE would be well suited to providing the following forms of training:

- training package-based VET
- segmented training (in which training is broken into short segments rather than being offered as a long course)
- flexible training
- customised training (including alternative styles of learning delivery to those normally available from mainstream VET)
- Internet-based training
- special provision for people facing changes in their work or redundancy as a result of industry changes
- training partnerships with enterprises
- provision of training assistance in the workplace
- AQF levels I and II (suggested as a niche market for ACE as the focus of TAFE moves to higher levels)

Mix of vocational and other learning

An issue which currently faces ACE providers is the extent to which they should move into vocational training. With limited budgets and the certainty that funding will not fully cover the demand for vocational provision, ACE providers need to strike a balance between their traditional 'non-vocational' general interest provision and that which is expressly vocational. As ACE providers move into VET there is a risk that some of the special characteristics of ACE which students and staff value so highly will be lost—ACE would become 'just another RTO' as one commentator put it. This possibility should not be overlooked in any determination of the relative proportions of vocational and other learning provided by ACE.

ACE management as a factor in pathways and linkages

The way in which ACE VET is managed has a bearing on how it is viewed by mainstream VET and industry which, in turn, can affect the provision of pathways and linkages between the two sectors. In this context it is suggested that the strong local component of ACE management, generally regarded as one of the strengths of ACE, should be retained, and that ACE management perspectives should be broadened by inviting consultative input to ACE management committees from industry and the community.

Introduction

Background

Traditionally, adult and community education (ACE) learning has tended to focus on lifestyle, leisure, equity, and the provision of basic skills. In recent years this focus has been extended to include more vocationally oriented programs. This extension of ACE learning has also increased opportunities for people to move into learning, and from one type of learning to another. More importantly, it has increased the potential for individuals to make the transition from informal learning for leisure and self-improvement to more formal learning for vocational purposes. This aspect of ACE can be particularly beneficial to people who have limited experience of vocational learning, or who have not participated in vocational learning for lengthy periods of time, or have had past unhappy experiences in their learning. Introducing people to vocational learning through ACE also has the potential to encourage them to undertake vocational learning in mainstream vocational education and training (VET) (primarily represented by technical and further education [TAFE]), a step they may not have contemplated previously through lack of confidence in their ability to cope with vocational study. In providing these extended learning opportunities, ACE is not only acting as a stepping stone to mainstream VET, it is encouraging people to participate in lifelong learning.

Where subject matter that has been studied with ACE overlaps that offered by mainstream VET or can satisfy mainstream VET prerequisites for enrolment in a mainstream VET course, students may be given credit for their completed ACE study. This can take the form of direct credit (credit transfer), or credit may be awarded through processes known as recognition of prior learning (RPL) or recognition of current competencies (RCC). The arrangements through which students are given credit are generally referred to as linkages, and where linkages have been established by agreement between the two sectors, they can give rise to pathways which enable students to pursue predetermined study routes that embrace both sectors. It should be noted that linkages and pathways can also apply to movement in the opposite direction, that is from mainstream VET to ACE, or even between other educational sectors. However, this study will focus on linkages that enable people to move from ACE to mainstream VET.

To enable linkages between ACE and mainstream VET to work effectively there are several conditions which must be met: there must be awareness and acceptance of the concept of ACE VET by mainstream VET, by industry, and by the community, and there must be an effective system by which students may utilise the linkages.

This study investigates the following issues relating to awareness and acceptance of ACE VET and its linkage to mainstream VET:

- the attitudes of industry, the mainstream VET sector and the community, to ACE generally, and to the concept of ACE provision of vocational learning
- the attitudes of industry, the mainstream VET sector and the community, to the concept of linkages between ACE and mainstream VET which enable people to move between the two sectors in their pursuit of vocational learning
- the state of existing linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET
- ways in which existing linkages may be improved or new ones developed
- ways in which promotion of ACE VET and ACE VET–mainstream VET linkages might be developed or improved

- the present status of ACE mainstream VET interaction in relation to vocational learning and ways in which it might be improved
- the implications, both for ACE and mainstream VET, of increased vocational provision by the ACE sector
- the directions ACE providers might consider in relation to future provision of vocational learning

Methodology

General

There were three main contributing groups to this research:

- providers of ACE VET including administration, management and teaching personnel (this group also included several representatives of ACE peak bodies and associations)
- students undertaking ACE VET
- industry representatives and other interested parties, including employer associations, industry training bodies and unions

The views of providers were obtained primarily by survey questionnaires, and interviews (in person and by telephone). In all, 69 provider personnel completed the survey questionnaires: 43 from New South Wales (NSW), 23 from South Australia (SA) and three who did not indicate the State in which they were employed.

The views of ACE students were also obtained by survey questionnaires. Completed questionnaires were received from 343 students in NSW and 40 in SA.

Information from the third group (industry representatives and other interested parties) was obtained through 68 interviews. These interviews were conducted either by visit or telephone, or a combination of both.

In summary, the information on which the project results are based was derived from 69 survey questionnaires completed by ACE provider personnel, 383 questionnaires completed by ACE students and a total of 68 interviews conducted with personnel from industry and the ACE sector.

ACE, mainstream VET and linkages defined

ACE and mainstream VET

One of the aims of this research was to look at the linkages between vocationally oriented learning provided by ACE and that provided by the established VET system. The original rationale for this research was that there would be distinct differences, both in delivery and content, between the two. In fact, the picture that emerged was not as straightforward—while there were differences, there were also similarities. In NSW, for example, it was found there were large ACE colleges which, for some years, had been providing VET programs similar to those available through a TAFE institute. In regard to VET provision therefore, these ACE colleges might be categorised as part of the established VET system. On the other hand, there were also TAFE institutes in SA providing ACE, which in a sense made them part of the ACE system. To further complicate the issue, providers on both sides were offering both accredited and non-accredited vocational programs.

For the purpose of this report the terms 'ACE VET' and 'mainstream VET' have been adopted to distinguish between the two streams of VET across which the linkages are deemed to operate. ACE VET is vocational learning (accredited or non-accredited) provided by an organisation set up to deliver adult and community education, and which is not primarily dependent on public funding. Mainstream VET covers accredited VET programs delivered by the traditional providers of VET such as TAFE institutions, large employers and some private providers. ACE providers that deliver significant amounts of VET were not considered to be mainstream VET because, although the content and outcomes of the VET programs they deliver can be similar to those of the mainstream providers, the natures of their organisations and program deliveries are different.

Linkages

The linkages which were the focus of this research were those between the categories of provider just mentioned. That is, linkages by which credit or recognition for learning achieved through ACE VET enabled a person to move to mainstream VET.

Although linkages can also be defined in terms of movement between *non-accredited* and *accredited* VET, that was not a criterion used in this research. It should be noted, however, that movement between non-accredited and accredited VET was often a component of the linkages studied, and furthermore, was frequently the reason people sought to link their vocational studies.

Persons and organisations consulted

In conducting this research a wide cross-section of individuals and organisations in both NSW and SA was consulted. They included:

- ❖ executive staff, teaching staff and students in:
  - – ACE colleges
  - – evening colleges
  - – community houses
  - – community centres
  - – neighbourhood houses
  - – TAFE-based ACE providers
  - – worker education associations
  - – private providers of ACE VET
- ❖ ACE State administrative/co-ordinating bodies
- ❖ ACE regional councils
- ❖ employer associations
- ❖ industry training advisory bodies (ITABs)
- ❖ unions

Responses to survey questionnaires

In survey questions in which a set list of items was provided for ratings or comments, respondents were invited to add further items. Generally, only a few did this. Unless the additional items were mentioned by several respondents or were judged to be of high relevance they were not reported.

In some cases responses involving ratings are ranked for reporting purposes by combining the two highest percentage ratings at one end of the scale. In such cases the percentages progressively increased across the scale. Where there were any significant anomalies (for example, polarisation of the responses at each end of the scale), this was reported.

Many of the comments reported are only stated by a few respondents. Where there are numerous comments of the same nature, this is generally pointed out in the report.

Frequencies and percentages reported for the provider and student survey questionnaire responses are for NSW and SA combined except where noted otherwise.

Percentages in tables may not always total exactly 100% due to rounding error.

Gratitude is extended to all project participants who completed the survey questionnaires. The questionnaires were extensive (56 questions in the provider questionnaire and 36 in the student version) and required considerable time and thought to complete (as some respondents confirmed with some frankness in their additional comments). The fact that the providers and students were willing to put themselves to so much trouble is indicative of the degree of enthusiasm (one could even say passion) in their regard for ACE and confirms the high standing of ACE in the eyes of its constituents.

Reporting of interview responses

The information gained from interviews has been analysed and categorised under various headings relevant to the aims of the project. Some of it is reported in the form of compilations of comments from respondents.

To preserve confidentiality but still indicate the background of the respondent, the provider of each response has been identified by a tag indicating the role of the respondent and the State in which he or she works. Some responses and comments have been paraphrased to make them more readable.

There is some duplication of comments in different sections because they are applicable in more than one section.

The overall tone of the interviews conducted for this report was one of openness and an underlying desire to see ACE and mainstream VET working together harmoniously. Because of this, the comments of interviewees were often quite frank and sometimes critical of some aspects of ACE–mainstream VET interaction. These comments have not been edited because to do so would detract from the impact and importance the interviewee wished to attach to an issue. However, it must be pointed out that the critical comments were invariably only a small proportion of all the views aired in an interview, and it was apparent they were delivered with the intention of raising issues in the hope that their resolution would benefit ACE–mainstream VET interaction. It would be most unfair, therefore, to allow these criticisms to imply that antagonism existed between ACE and mainstream VET. It did not.

The respondents

A total of 117 providers, 389 students and 21 representatives from industry provided information for this study.

Providers

Of the 386 provider questionnaires that were sent out, 306 were to NSW and 80 were to SA. The recipients of the questionnaires were: representatives from ACE administrative/co-ordinating bodies, ACE provider associations and similar bodies, ACE regional officers, and directors, principals, managers, education officers, co-ordinators and teaching staff within ACE provider institutions. Distribution of the questionnaires within the ACE provider institutions was at the discretion of the initial contact person (most often the director, principal or manager) in accordance with a set of guidelines accompanying the questionnaires. Responses were entirely voluntary. A pre-addressed reply-paid envelope was provided with each questionnaire for return of the completed form.

In all, 69 questionnaires were returned in time for inclusion in the data, 43 from NSW and 23 from SA giving response rates of 14% and 29% respectively. Three in which respondents did not identify their State were also received. One additional questionnaire was returned too late to be included in the numerical data, making an overall total of 70. Where relevant, the suggestions and comments from this additional return (which was from SA) have been incorporated into the report. Respondents identified 38 separate organisations.

For convenience in reporting and discussion, all respondents from provider organisations have been referred to as 'providers'.

Provider questionnaire respondents were predominantly teachers, course co-ordinators and managers as detailed in table 1.

Table 1: Positions held by ACE provider questionnaire respondents

Positions of ACE provider personnel responding to questionnaire	Number
Principal/executive officer/manager	12
Program co-ordinator/course director/education officer	16
Tutor/trainer/teacher/educator/lecturer	28
ACE regional council officer	3
ACE association/advisory body representatives	2
Other (not clear)	1

Based on postcodes and other information provided, the geographical locations of all but nine of the provider respondents were determined and allocated to three broad categories: *Capital city; Other metropolitan* (an ABS designation used for urban centres, other than capital cities, with populations in excess of 100 000, such as Newcastle or Wollongong) and *Rural or remote*.

The results are summarised in table 2.

Table 2: Geographic locations of providers

Region	NSW	SA	Total
Capital city	22	22	44
Other metropolitan*	3	0	3
Rural or remote	12	1	13
Total	**37**	**23**	**60**

* Urban centres with populations greater than 100 000 (e.g. Newcastle, Wollongong)

Providers responding to the questionnaire were asked to indicate the primary nature of their organisation. As shown in table 3, almost all (89%) of the 64 who did so saw their organisation primarily as an adult community education provider.

Table 3: Primary nature of provider respondent's organisation

Primary nature of organisation	% (of 64 responses)
Adult community education provider	89
Government funded vocational provider	5
Non-government vocational provider	5
Provider of non-accredited vocational education	2

Providers indicated that ACE continues to offer its traditional programs (general interest programs) along with a growing number of accredited and non-accredited vocational programs. Table 4 summarises their responses.

Table 4: Types of learning offered

Type of learning	% (of 202 responses)
General non-vocational (e.g. Internet for seniors, amateur astronomy, public speaking, aromatherapy).	27
Basic skills (e.g. English as a second language, literacy, numeracy, communication).	27
Non-accredited vocationally oriented learning (e.g. keyboard skills, small business operation, food preparation for invalids).	25
Accredited vocational learning (e.g. first aid, bookkeeping, airline ticketing, supervision, hairdressing, pastry cook, electrical mechanic).	21

In addition to the providers surveyed by questionnaire, a further 47 providers and other ACE personnel representing 42 separate provider organisations were interviewed. Details of the backgrounds of the interviewees are summarised in table 5.

Table 5: Details of ACE personnel interviewed

ACE personnel interviewed	
ACE administration representatives (NSW: 4, SA: 1)	5
ACE association representatives (NSW)	1
ACE principals, managers, co-ordinators, education officers (NSW: 19, SA: 14)	33
ACE regional council officers (NSW)	5
WEA executive representatives (NSW: 2, SA: 1)	3

Industry representatives

A total of 21 representatives from industry including employer associations, unions, and ITABs were also interviewed. Details of the backgrounds of these interviewees are summarised in table 6.

Table 6: Details of industry representatives interviewed

Industry representatives interviewed	
Employer association representatives (NSW: 2, SA: 1)	3
ITAB executive representatives & officers (NSW: 6, SA: 7)	13
Union representatives (NSW: 2, SA: 3)	5

Students

A total of 2616 student questionnaires were sent out; 2040 to NSW and 576 to SA. Responses were voluntary. A total of 383 students returned completed questionnaires, 343 from NSW and 40 from SA giving response rates of 17% and 7% respectively.

A further six questionnaires were returned too late to be included in the numerical data, one from NSW and five from SA. Where relevant, the suggestions and comments from these additional returns have been incorporated into the report.

Overall, female student respondents outnumbered males by a ratio of 3:1 (73% female). In SA, the disparity was even greater with a ratio of 9:1 (90% female).

Although the SA sample was relatively small, the higher disparity would appear to support the view that the smaller neighbourhood houses which appear to exist in greater proportion in SA (in comparison with the larger 'college' type organisations more often found in NSW) may offer more personal enrichment programs and vocational programs likely to be sought by female students.

Several ACE providers noted that vocational courses tended to attract a more even gender balance.

> *Our figures would be about 70% female to 30% male overall. However, the figures would be more like 55% female to 45% male for vocational education.* (ACE principal, NSW)

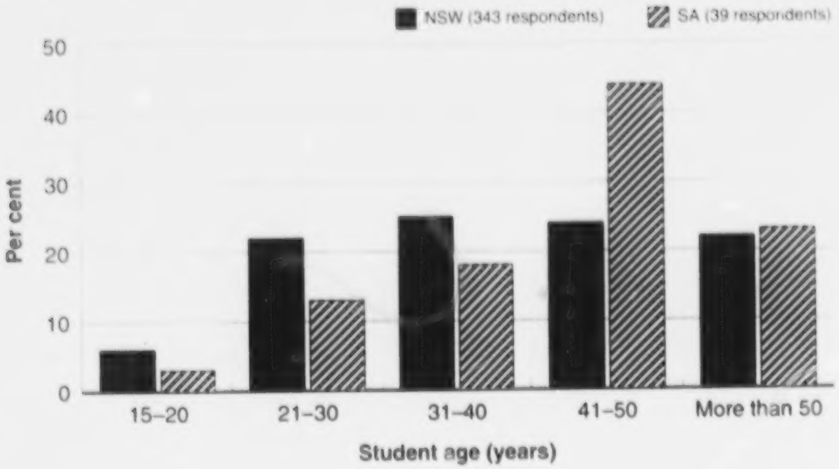
Ages of student respondents were categorised into five ranges as specified in figure 1. In NSW, the upper four ranges contained a relatively even distribution of respondents, with between 22% and 25% in each age range. The SA sample, although small (39 respondents), was skewed towards higher ages with 44% in the 41–50 years range. In both States there were significantly fewer in the lowest age range (15–20 years). The strong representation of upper age groups in the sample (overall, almost 50% over 40 years of age and more than 70% over 30 years) reflects the important role ACE is playing in facilitating lifelong learning for mature-age people.

About 95% of respondents to the student questionnaire spoke English in their homes. Eighteen of the 21 respondents who did not normally speak English in their home specified the language spoken. Of the languages specified, eight were Asian, six were European and four were Middle Eastern.

Only a very small proportion of students (0.8% of 387 responses) indicated they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent.

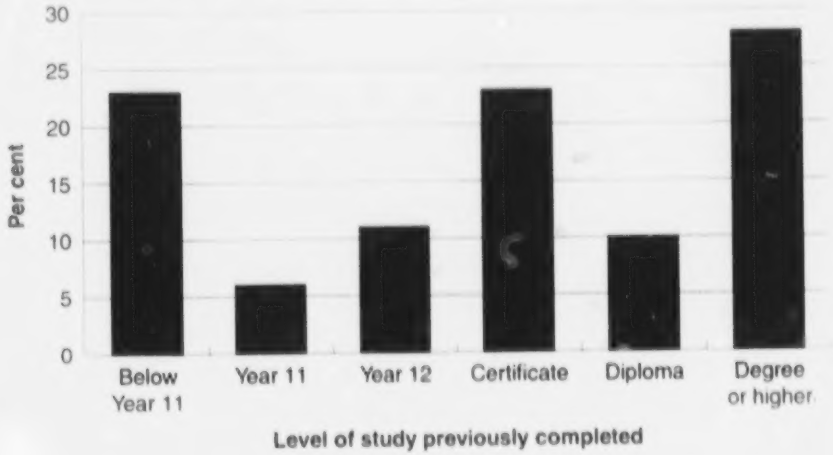
A small proportion of students (6.5% of 387 responses) indicated they had a disability which might affect their ability to work.

Figure 1: Age ranges of student respondents



The highest level of previously completed study was reported by 383 students. The three most commonly indicated levels were: *Degree or higher*, *Certificate*, and *Below Year 11*. All results are summarised in figure 2. The reasons for the relatively low percentages for *Year 11*, *Year 12* and *Diploma* and hence inconsistent trends across the levels, are not known.

Figure 2: Highest level of study completed



Just on two-fifths (39%) of the sample of 383 students indicated they had previously studied at an ACE-type organisation (such as an adult community education centre, neighbourhood house, or Workers' Education Association [WEA]) and a similar proportion (42%) indicated a TAFE institution or similar mainstream VET provider. Some students indicated they had studied in both types of organisation.

Of the 380 students who indicated their employment status, just under three-quarters (71%) said they were currently employed. Of those who were currently employed, over eight out of ten (82%) were working at least 15 hours per week, and of those not currently employed, almost nine out of ten (87%) said they previously had regular employment.

These responses suggest that ACE is catering primarily for people who have had experience of employment.

Students who were currently employed were invited to state their occupation The extensive range of occupations stated by the 240 who did so was indicative of the breadth of the community ACE serves. A sample of the occupations is given in table 7.

Table 7: Sample of occupations stated by student respondents

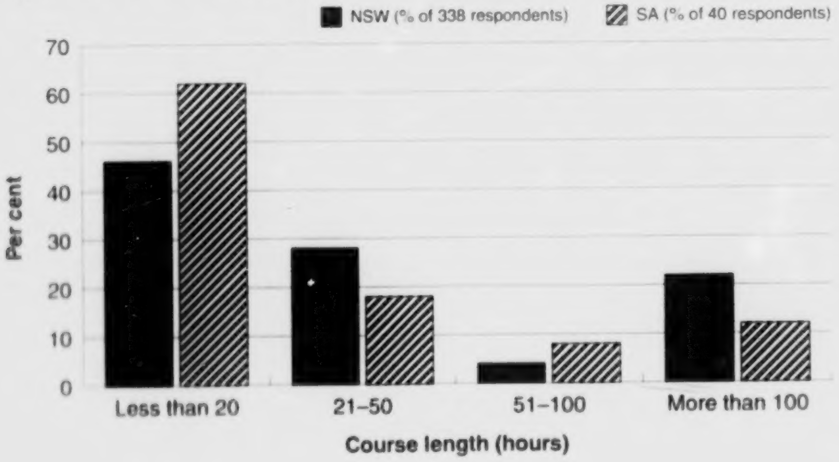
adventure trainer
bank officer
chef
cleaner
correctional officer
doctor
editor
factory worker
horticulturalist
IT consultant
lawyer
manager (labour hire)
metallurgist
midwife
nurse
photographer
security officer
shipwright
truck driver
wine consultant

Just over two-thirds of students (67%) were currently undertaking the ACE program upon which they were basing their answers. The remainder had completed it.

Almost all (99%) of the students surveyed studied by attending classes. However, this figure should not be taken to imply that only 1% of ACE vocational students study by alternative means, such as distance education. Because almost all of the questionnaires were distributed to students by provider staff, it is probable they went to students attending classes because they were most easily accessible.

Overall, nearly half of the students in the survey indicated the length of their course was less than 20 hours and about another quarter indicated 21 to 50 hours. Figure 3 shows the patterns of responses for NSW and SA.

Figure 3: Student indications of length of course



Although the reason for the very low percentage of students undertaking courses of 51–100 hours duration could not be determined, it is likely that it reflects a gap which exists between the modules or 'short courses' (commonly ranging from 15 to 30 hours in length) often undertaken by ACE students, and whole courses (often of the order of 200 hours and comprising a series of modules). One commentator from NSW suggested that the 51–100 hour courses could be literacy tuition, which commonly fell within the 80–100 hour range. However, this could not be easily verified.

When asked if the ACE provider of their course was a registered provider of VET, a considerable proportion of students said they were *Not sure* (NSW: 41%, SA: 63%). Of those who felt able to answer the question, 90% in NSW and 50% in SA said their provider was registered. Although the differences between the two States should be treated with caution because the sample for SA was small (38 respondents), these results support the view that vocational emphasis in ACE tends to be stronger in NSW than in SA.

The geographical locations of the student survey respondents were also determined according to postcodes and allocated to three broad categories: *Capital city; Other metropolitan* and *Rural or remote*. All but seven of the student respondents could be categorised in this way. The results are summarised in table 8.

Table 8: Geographic locations of students

Region	NSW	SA	Total
Capital city	257	38	295
Other metropolitan*	37	0	37
Rural or remote	48	2	50
Total	**342**	**40**	**382**

* Urban centres with populations greater than 100 000 (e.g. Newcastle, Wollongong)

The ACE sector

This study focusses on ACE VET in NSW and SA. The following is a brief outline of the relevant ACE features in each State.

ACE in New South Wales

ACE providers in NSW can be categorised into three groups: evening and community colleges (23 providers), community and adult education centres (43 providers) and workers' education associations (3 providers). At the time this research was undertaken, these three groups were each represented by their own peak body. It was understood, however, that on 25 May 2000, these individual peak bodies were to be replaced by a single body to be known as the Adult and Community Education Council of NSW.

All of these providers are community-owned and managed organisations supported by the NSW Board of Adult and Community Education (BACE). They are largely self-funded, although government funding is provided through BACE for some programs. In the case of a few providers, the amount of government funding is quite large (in the region of $450 000 per year for one ACE college out of a total budget of $2 000 000).

In NSW, ACE providers are serviced by nine regional councils of ACE whose role is to promote and support ACE, facilitate liaison between ACE providers, and assist BACE in the implementation of policies and priorities.

As well as offering non-accredited learning, many ACE providers are registered training organisations (RTOs), able to provide accredited vocational education and training.

Although TAFE colleges provide some learning which is similar to, and can overlap ACE (such as Outreach programs and TAFE Plus), they are not generally regarded as ACE providers.

For the purposes of this research, representatives of BACE, regional councils and all three categories of ACE provider were consulted.

ACE in South Australia

In SA there were 103 ACE providers receiving funding through the Adult and Community Education Unit in SA. These providers operated under a variety of titles, the most common being community centres and neighbourhood houses. As in NSW, the Workers' Educational Association was also regarded as a provider of ACE.

Unlike NSW, some TAFE institutes in SA provided ACE in addition to their normal vocational provision. In some cases, the ACE programs were provided by a separate unit which operated relatively independently of normal VET provision; in others the ACE programs were provided within the normal institute structure (for example, by a School of Business Studies). The ACE programs were essentially self-funding.

By comparison with NSW, ACE provision in SA appeared to be much more localised and less oriented towards vocational provision.

In SA, representatives of the SA Adult and Community Education Unit, community centres, neighbourhood houses, WEA, and ACE providers associated with TAFE institutes were consulted for this research.

ACE VET provision

To many people, ACE learning can be simply summed up as comprising highly focussed programs, often short in length, aimed at providing learners with the desired knowledge and skills in a friendly, supportive environment.

Within an ACE class it is not uncommon to find people from a diverse range of backgrounds undertaking study for equally diverse reasons. Some may be undertaking their course as a hobby, some just to learn something of interest, some to test whether they can cope with study before embarking on something more ambitious, some because it may be an avenue to employment, and some because they need the skills for their work or to run a business.

There is also an increasing likelihood that, amongst these people, there may be some who will subsequently obtain credit or some other form of recognition from mainstream VET for their ACE learning and so use it as a stepping stone to further study outside the ACE sector.

With comparatively few students in the 15 to 20-year-age group, ACE students, as a whole, tend to be older than their counterparts in mainstream VET—an indication, perhaps, of the significant contribution ACE makes to lifelong learning for mature-age students.

Whether or not ACE learning is vocational is a contentious issue. In the case of mainstream VET the answer is clear—people almost invariably undertake studies with mainstream VET organisations because they need the knowledge and skills for the work they do—or plan to do. For ACE, the answer is not nearly as clear. A large proportion of the ACE learning offered under various labels such as *general interest, leisure, pleasure, enrichment* or *personal development* can have application in the world of work. Many people undertake these courses intending to use the knowledge and skills gained in their work; others subsequently find they can do so. The following comments illustrate how ACE learning, whether expressly vocational or not, can be applied vocationally.

> *When the college put Feng Shui on they felt it was questionable whether it had value as a subject. They put it on because the trainer had such impressive credentials as an architect and was an expert in the area in general and it looked as though it could be a quality presentation. We found the people enrolling in it were estate agents, builders, surveyors—people in the building industry. They were looking at improving their capabilities with people for whom Feng Shui was important. So although it was not a vocational program as such, people were enrolling in it for vocational motives—to expand their business opportunity. We are finding that although a program is not vocational, it can sometimes be full of people who are doing it for vocational reasons. In our massage courses, half the people doing it are in it for vocational reasons.* (ACE principal, NSW)

> *I've personally taught cake decorating for many years in an ACE program and I would say that almost 100% of those people enter the program with no vocational intent at all. After about two terms 90% of them have a vocational intent. A lot of that is just cottage industry, but others go on to business studies where they do business skills in how to set up their businesses, or they go into hospitality courses, or they might go and work for a shop that does cake decorating, or go and work for Coles and Woolworths in their bakery sections.* (ACE education officer, SA)

There were numerous other examples cited, such as floral art being undertaken by occupational therapists for their work with patients, ACE massage courses leading on to certificate level study, and public-speaking or presentation techniques contributing to skills as a workplace trainer.

Some suggested that whether or not a course was vocational hinged on the intent of the learner—if the learner intended to use the knowledge and skills vocationally, then it was vocational learning. As noted earlier, vocational intent of a student can even develop during a course, which further complicates the issue.

Others saw courses resulting in personal development, such as increased assertiveness and confidence, negotiation skills, and leadership as being vocational. An employer association representative, for instance, saw vocational merit from a broad perspective, saying that even ballroom dancing could provide vocational benefits:

> *... even ballroom dancing [could have vocational benefits], it's all relevant to the development of the individual, the development of the individual's perspective on life, their confidence, the way they view things, even their ability to understand themselves—these things are relevant to how they perform in any job.* (Employer association representative, SA)

Whether or not a course is deemed vocational also has GST implications. For taxation reasons, ACE providers need to establish at the outset what type of course it is if they are to avoid complications with fees.

Language and literacy in ACE

ACE has long been a provider of language and literacy learning. Not only does this learning assist people to cope with the demands of everyday life in our society, it can also enable them to meet the requirements of the work they perform. Indeed ACE recognises this and often tailors the program to meet work-related needs. In this latter sense, even non-accredited programs provide vocational learning.

Perceptions of ACE vocational programs

Important to the success of ACE VET is how it is viewed—by the students who hope to be able to use the knowledge and skills learned, by industry which needs to see benefits from employing ACE graduates, by mainstream VET with which ACE seeks to link, and by the ACE sector which needs to be satisfied that ACE VET is in the interests of ACE and its students. The following summary of the views of participants in this project gives insight to some of the issues involved.

As mentioned previously, one of the characteristics often found in ACE VET is that it consists of short, focussed courses designed to meet particular needs of students and industry. As one ACE representative put it: '... what ACE is doing is taking a certificate [accredited] course and breaking it into short courses [modularising it] with statements of attainment available'. In some cases, the statements of attainment are sufficient to meet the needs of the students and employers, particularly in small business and regional areas.

TAFE, too, is now providing VET in a format which, in some respects, is similar to that of ACE—short courses, highly focussed on the needs of the student and the employer. In NSW this is offered under the banner of 'TAFE Plus'. NSW TAFE sees this as being different from ACE VET in that it focusses on large businesses and organisations as opposed to a stronger ACE focus on small and local businesses. In SA, too, there are TAFE-based providers offering 'ACE'-type learning. However, they see themselves more as ACE providers operating in association with TAFE, with their offerings being similar to that of other ACE providers. In both cases, being TAFE-based providers, they theoretically have access to the resources of the TAFE corporate system. In practice, however, this can be restricted by competing demands for facilities from mainstream TAFE. One of the TAFE institute-based ACE providers in SA also noted that, because their students were in the same building as the mainstream VET providers, and they had many lecturers who taught across both sectors and taught with a view to linkages, the students were better positioned to take advantage of linkages and were less likely to be intimidated by the prospect of moving on to TAFE.

Strengths of ACE VET

Many of the features that make ACE VET different from mainstream VET are regarded as its 'strengths'. They are often reasons why people choose to study with ACE. Identification and rating of these strengths was used as an indirect means of determining people's perception of the most important advantages of ACE provision.

Provider ratings of strengths

Providers were given a list of ten features of ACE VET commonly referred to as strengths and asked to rate the significance of each in distinguishing ACE VET from mainstream VET. The findings indicated that almost all (96%) of the providers saw an informal, friendly and non-threatening environment as the most important feature of ACE VET. Other highly rated features (all chosen by over 80%) were, a capacity to serve students from wide-ranging backgrounds, a capacity to meet special student and employer needs, the helpful attitudes of teaching personnel, a minimum of bureaucracy, and emphasis on skills mastery rather than course deadlines. Full details of these and other results are provided in table 9.

Table 9: Provider ratings of 'strengths' of ACE VET

Feature nominated as a 'strength' of ACE VET	% of providers rating as *Extremely significant* or *Very significant*
Informal, friendly, non-threatening environment	96
Capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of needs, skills and backgrounds	86
Able to respond to special needs of individual students and employers	86
The trainer is a helper rather than a learning authority	86
Minimum of bureaucracy	85
Emphasis on mastering skills and knowledge rather than completing course in a set time	83
Often locally managed	76
Students may enter and leave learning programs easily	74
Able to provide wide range of teaching formats	74
Good physical accessibility	65

Student ratings of strengths

For comparison, students were asked to rate how important the same ten features were as 'strengths' of ACE vocational study. Here, again, an informal, friendly and non-threatening environment was chosen as the most important feature. Like the providers most of the features were chosen by over 80% of respondents. Full details of the results are provided in table 10.

The only notable difference between the responses of the students and providers was that students ranked the item *Able to provide wide range of teaching formats* more highly than did providers. It should be encouraging for ACE providers to see that their focus on provision of informal, friendly, non-threatening environments for learning is recognised and highly valued by the students. ACE would be well advised to maintain and promote this feature of its vocational learning provision.

Table 10: Student ratings of 'strengths' of ACE VET

Feature nominated as a 'strength' of ACE VET	% of students rating as *Extremely important* or *Important*
Informal, friendly, non-threatening environment	88
Emphasis on mastering skills and knowledge rather than course completion in set time	83
Able to provide wide range of teaching formats	82
Trainer is a helper rather than a learning authority	82
Able to respond to special needs of individual students and employers	81
Capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of skill needs and backgrounds	80
Good physical accessibility	80
Minimum of bureaucracy	77
Students may enter and leave learning programs easily	72
Often locally managed	70

The magnitude of the percentages confirms the perceptions of these features as strengths (and hence advantages) of ACE. If, as the question proposed, these are the features which distinguish ACE from mainstream VET, then it would be wise for ACE providers to ensure that they are not weakened or lost. Elsewhere in this report it is noted that, on occasions, ACE providers express concern that they may become 'just another RTO' as they move further into provision of accredited vocational education. Maintaining, and even enhancing, ACE's strengths is one way of lessening the likelihood of this occurring. Indeed, if ACE providers wish to increase their provision of vocational learning as a service to the community, they might well consider capitalising on these features by enhancing and promoting them in association with their vocational learning programs.

Comments on strengths of ACE VET

In order to present a more comprehensive picture of the strengths of ACE VET, points made by providers and industry representatives about some of the highly ranked features are discussed below.

Flexibility in delivery

Many of the strengths identified by students in tables 9 and 10 relate in various ways to what can be generally termed the *flexibility* of ACE VET. One of the aspects of flexibility which is said to make ACE learning provision preferred over mainstream VET is its ability to cater for the needs of students who find it difficult to integrate their studies with other commitments. Some providers indicated that ACE was well positioned to provide flexibility in delivery of vocational learning because, through the use of sessional employees instead of permanent teaching staff, they were able to select teachers who could teach in evenings, on weekends, through holiday periods, and in a variety of locations. In addition, ACE provider organisations were more widely dispersed through the community and therefore often geographically closer to the location where the training was required. The following comments from a NSW principal illustrate the flexible approach ACE has to vocational provision:

> *We were rung up on a Friday and asked if we could start a typing course on the following Tuesday to get a group of armed services personnel up to 30 words per minute in seven days. It was a totally focussed course—they had to do it. It was against all normal adult learning principles, but was*

> *entirely appropriate for that group. So we had one typing course for these people and the usual softer approach for other students.*

and a later remark:

> *… you are unlikely to find many small business managers allowing an employee a day off each week. In such cases, the one thing ACE can, and does, do well is to use its flexibility to put courses on, say, on a weekend, or in the evening. We'd run them at midnight if we had to.*
>
> (ACE principal, NSW)

When providers and students were asked in their questionnaires to compare the flexibility of ACE study with that of mainstream VET, around three-quarters of them (78% and 74% respectively) rated ACE either as *more flexible* or *much more flexible* than mainstream VET. Only very small proportions selected either *less flexible* or *much less flexible* the other end of the scale (providers 2%, students 0.4%)

Flexibility, it would seem, is a distinguishing feature of ACE VET worthy of preservation and promotion. This was confirmed when 95% of providers, in answer to another question, indicated it should be extended and promoted as a benefit of ACE learning provision.

Ability to meet individual and workplace needs

Many people feel that ACE, because of its close association with local communities, businesses and students, is in closer touch with vocational needs than mainstream VET organisations. ACE, with its wide coverage of metropolitan and regional areas, can also act as a conduit through which vocational education can be provided to small businesses and small country towns.

In ACE, the trainer also usually deals directly with the workplace, determining requirements, designing the training program and teaching it, thus helping to ensure that the training accurately matches workplace requirements. With the advent of training packages, this is seen as a particularly valuable asset. Being able to attract and draw on part-time teachers and trainers from a wide range of backgrounds, ACE is in a strong position to select appropriate people for the task.

Relaxed and supportive learning environments

Students, providers and industry were fulsome in their praise of the informal, friendly and supportive nature of ACE. Indeed, the success of ACE as a provider of vocational learning is due in no small part to the fact that it is perceived as being less intimidating than mainstream VET organisations. People feel more comfortable studying with ACE, particularly those who, for one reason or another, are apprehensive about study or need ongoing reassurance and support. This feature can be especially important to people who are returning to study because of job changes or loss of employment.

In this context, one ACE principal made the interesting observation that: ACE, 'because of its philosophy, attracts teachers who see their role as being beyond merely delivering the required competencies. The way they deal with students is more nurturing, which is important because of the type of student who comes to ACE'.

The following comments also illustrate how importantly this feature of ACE VET is viewed.

> *The primary catchment area for [our] centre is a low socio-economic level. Students are apprehensive about going to a TAFE institution. The TAFE campus is like an ivory tower to them and they wouldn't go within cooee of it. ACE enables them to be influenced to do so in a roundabout way. [However,] we have to be careful to introduce the objective of moving from ACE to TAFE very slowly. We're basically teaching people not to be frightened of life.*
>
> (ACE Manager, SA)

> *[ACE] encourages people to have a go. And I think that's really important—we can't lose that. It's the first port of call for some who have never been back to school or pursued any education.*
>
> (Union representative, SA)

If ACE wishes to promote its vocational provision, it should ensure that it capitalises on the above-mentioned features which so strongly set it apart from many other mainstream vocational providers.

Nature and quality of courses

People find ACE courses attractive for a variety of reasons. They like the care with which they are put together and the easygoing style of teaching. Students, employers and other industry people all liked the focussed nature of the course content, which in turn helped make the courses relevant and to the point. 'Short', 'sharp', 'snappy', and 'punchy' were words commonly used in describing ACE vocational courses. An ACE association representative also drew attention to the benefit arising from a tutor's involvement in designing and setting up a course: 'One of the things students most like about ACE is the tutors and their style of teaching. The thing that makes these people unique and gives added value to the organisation is the way they put their courses together. In a sense, it's [the tutor's] course and it has an identity to it. We don't want to strip this away. Many tutors would have a sense of propriety about their courses'.

Coming from a background of 'soft' general interest courses, ACE has done well in recent years to develop a reputation for quality in its vocational provision. If it wishes to enhance its future role as a provider of vocational learning it must continue striving to improve the consistency and quality of its courses while maintaining its highly regarded student-centred, needs-focussed approach. However, ACE must also be particularly vigilant in ensuring its courses meet industry standards and are ethically used. The following comment from a union highlights the potential danger for ACE in this regard:

> *[ACE could be perceived by employers as] cheap, quick, and largely uncredentialled. [Employers] can get away with murder with it and that's why I am really unsure about the role of ACE.*
>
> (Union representative, NSW)

Criticisms of ACE VET

Not all industry representatives were confident that ACE had the ability to provide vocational education of an adequate standard for their industry sector, as the following comments from ITABs indicate:

> *The problem we would have with the ACE sector in regard to formal training is the capacity of the ACE sector to develop or deliver vocationally relevant training. I do not have a great deal of confidence in the ACE sector being able to harness the expertise and qualifications required for that delivery.* (ITAB executive representative, SA)

> *I would be worried about ACE muddying the water in a sense. We already have enough trouble explaining [to industry] national accreditation of courses and the use of registered training providers and all of the paraphernalia around the national training system. If ACE then bundles in with look-alike course offerings then it just adds confusion—we already have providers who are not registered offering courses all over the country ... I think there are many people in the community organisations who could fill [training] gaps that are not being effectively filled by self-employed training providers. However the dangers are that the stuff they deliver may not be of a contemporary nature or of a high enough standard in terms of what would be available through an accredited program.* (ITAB executive representative, SA)

One ACE principal cautioned against expecting too much from interaction between ACE and ITABs saying that ITABs only have limited resources and it would be unfair to expect them to provide much in the way of resources to assist in implementation of ACE vocational training programs.

Finally, several union spokespersons commented on concerns the unions had about the effect ACE training might have on employees' wages. The concerns centred on the possibility that, by undertaking ACE training, employees might qualify for a lower-level award and so fail to gain pay rates to which they could otherwise be entitled. It was suggested that in some cases an employee's wages might even be reduced.

In this context, linking ACE VET to mainstream VET and the establishment of pathways could help to reduce the likelihood of wages being affected in several ways—by facilitating formal recognition of the level of particular ACE programs and by showing how the programs fit in to the overall qualifications structure and how progression can occur via ACE VET.

ACE vocational programs: Expectations and outcomes

In order to better understand the attraction ACE VET holds for students, this study looked at both student and provider perceptions of the reasons students chose to undertake ACE VET. Other factors relevant to this issue which were also examined included student and provider perceptions of ACE VET study outcomes, and student satisfaction with various aspects of ACE VET.

Why students choose ACE vocational programs

In the survey questionnaires, both providers and students were asked why they thought students chose to undertake ACE vocational study. Both groups were given a list of 16 possible reasons to choose from and were invited to add any others they wished to nominate. More than one reason could be chosen. All 69 providers and 379 students responded giving a total of 565 and 1181 responses respectively. Figure 4 shows the patterns of responses for the two groups. The percentages are proportions of the respective total number of responses for each group.

Inspection of figure 4 shows *More suitable course times*, *Course is at right level*, *Learn skills for current employment*, *To obtain a qualification*, and *More friendly, less formal organisation* were ranked relatively highly and therefore seen as important by both groups. At the other end of the scale, neither group saw *Access to childcare*, *Test ability to undertake VET*, *ACE provides more social contact*, or *Comply with employer requirement* as being common reasons for students undertaking vocational study with ACE.

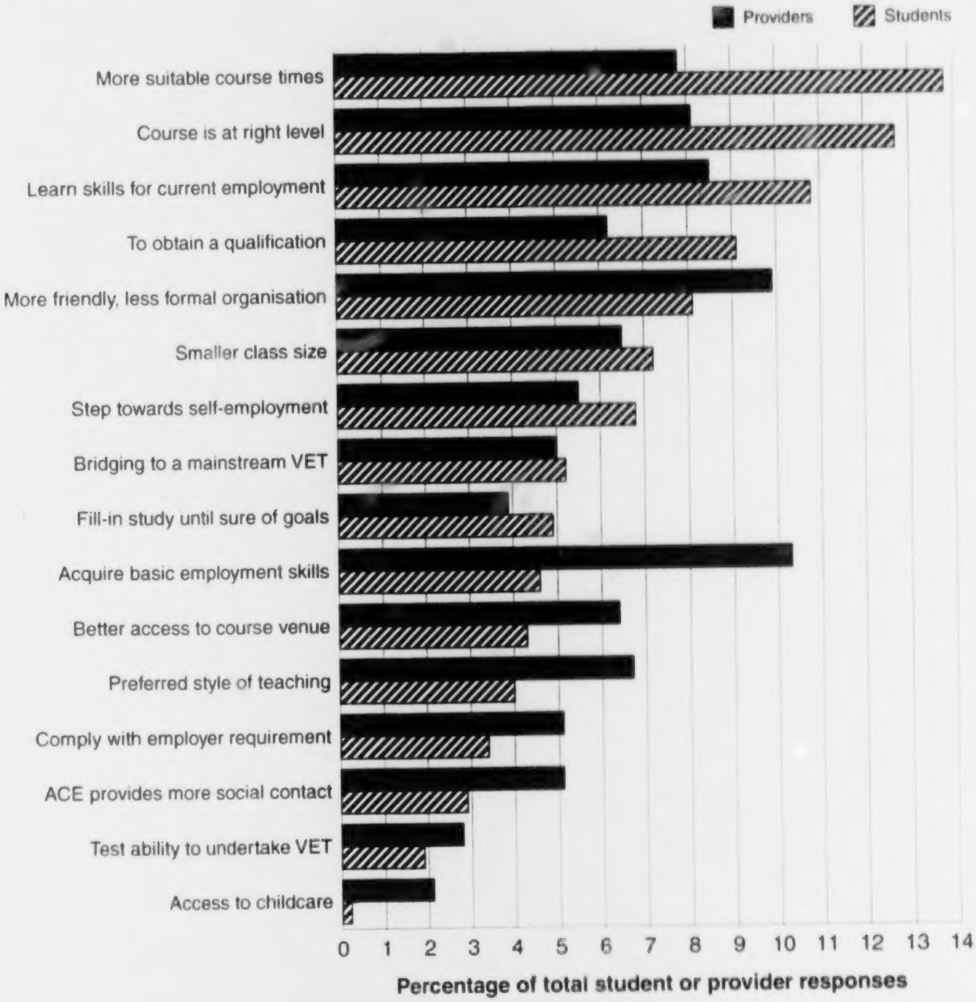
Note: Low ranks of some of these reasons should be treated with caution. For example, if childcare was not available at the time of enrolment, people needing it would not enrol leaving only those who did to register their views in this study.

Prominent differences between providers and students were found for several of the listed reasons: while both students and providers saw *More suitable course times*, *Course is at right level* and *To obtain a qualification* as important reasons for students choosing ACE study, students attached more importance to them than did providers. Providers, on the other hand, were stronger in their choice of *Acquire basic employment skills*, *Preferred style of teaching* and *ACE provides more social contact*.

In making observations about differences between providers and students it needs to be pointed out that there could be confounding factors affecting some of them. For example, the term 'qualification' in *To obtain a qualification* may not have held the same meaning for students as it did for providers. Students may have perceived a qualification merely as a document confirming their participation in a course whereas providers may have seen it as formal Australian Qualifications Framework recognition. *Acquire basic employment skills*, too, may have been subject to different interpretation by students and providers. The rather interesting difference obtained for *ACE provides more social contact* might be due, in part, to the nature of the student population surveyed. Perhaps ACE vocational students do not attach as much importance to it as the more traditional non-vocational students with whom providers might be more familiar.

The percentages shown in figure 4 are for both NSW and SA combined. There were no significant differences between the two States.

Figure 4: Perception of student reasons for undertaking ACE vocational study



In their additional comments on the issue of reasons for choosing ACE vocational study, four students mentioned they chose ACE because of the availability of short, or even intensive courses: 'TAFE courses were too long (14 weeks)—just wanted basic info in a short time' said one. Others said: 'Concentrated study over a few days'; 'Faster results (longer hours)'; and 'Couldn't bear undertaking a course that lasted a term or semester'.

An ACE college manager commented in similar vein: 'In our college particularly, we see a lot of current TAFE students choosing to use us because we have shorter, quicker, equivalent TAFE modules on offer here and they are not having to tie themselves in to doing a certificate course—they can come and do a module at a time'.

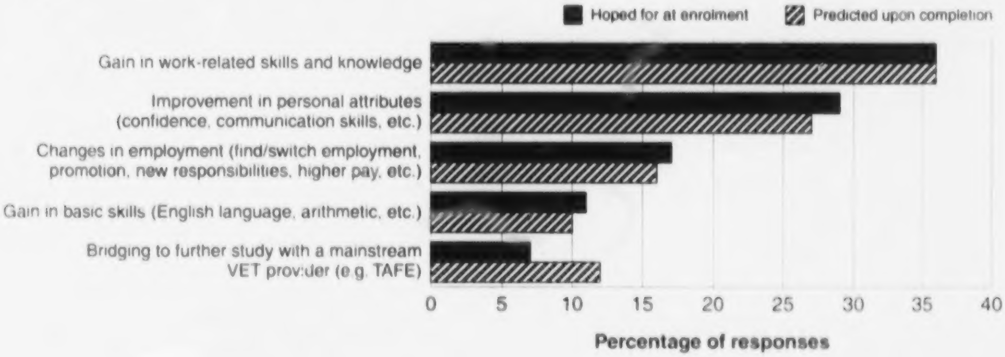
Of course, not all ACE students look for this type of study—as reported a few pages further on, some complained that their course: 'was too condensed', 'moved very quickly', 'was not long enough', or 'was too short'. They seek, instead, the relaxed easygoing learning ACE also offers. To meet these conflicting demands, ACE should use its flexibility to offer options to satisfy both requirements—something it appears to have been able to do with considerable success in recent years.

Meeting student expectations

Student views

To find out how well ACE VET met the expectations of students, the students were first asked to recall what they had hoped their course would achieve for them at enrolment, and then, in the light of their experience in the course, what they expected it would actually achieve for them. It was also hoped that the comparison of the two sets of responses would give an indication of how realistic ACE students' expectations were and thus, indirectly, how well informed they were when they enrolled. Three-hundred-and-seventy-nine students reported on their hopes when they enrolled and 371 reported on their actual outcomes. Figure 5 shows the comparative percentages of respondents choosing each of the outcomes listed in the questions.

Figure 5: Student views on outcomes of ACE VET

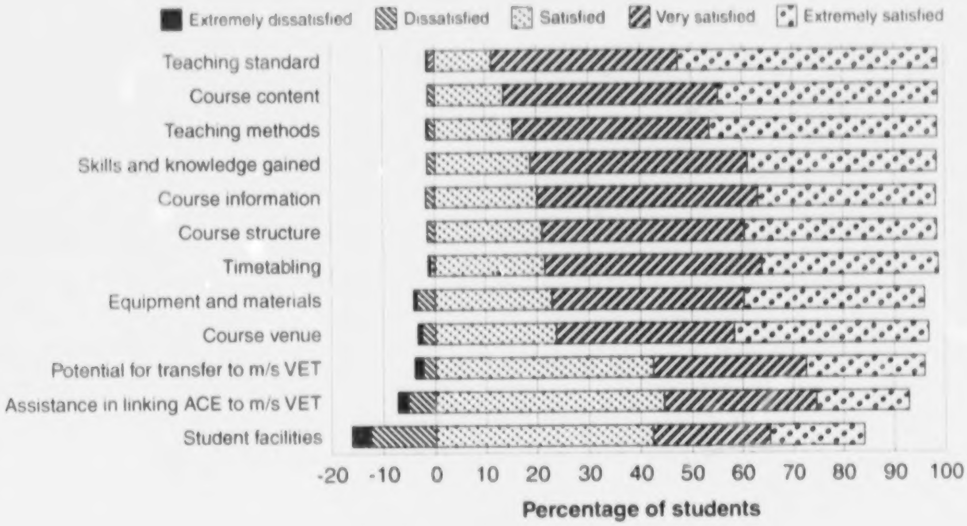


With one exception, the pairs of percentages were remarkably close (within 2% of each other) suggesting that students' expectations were realised and implying that students were generally well informed at enrolment regarding what they were likely to gain from their course. The exception was for *Bridging to further study* where the predicted outcome after time in the course (12%) almost doubled the initially hoped for outcome (7%). This difference raises the possibility that some students may only have become aware of the possibility of bridging to further study while undertaking their course, or alternatively, may have only begun to see bridging as an option after they had gained confidence and/or a desire to continue their studies.

The first hypothesis is supported by the responses to a separate question in which students were asked to indicate their awareness of credit transfer provision prior to enrolling in their ACE course. Just over three-quarters either said they were unaware of credit transfer or were unable to answer the question. The combination of this result with that for *Bridging to further study*, above, indicates a need for ACE to better clarify and promote the option of credit transfer and bridging to further study. However, it is important that it be gently presented as an option, to be pursued if desired, because other evidence from this study shows that some students are intimidated by courses which appear too formal or too much like mainstream VET.

To determine how satisfied students were with their courses, they were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with 12 aspects of their course. Figure 6 shows the pattern of responses for each of the listed aspects. They are ranked in order of the combined percentages for *Very satisfied* and *Extremely satisfied*.

Figure 6: Student satisfaction with various aspects of course provision



Taken overall, students were very satisfied with ACE VET. Nine of the 12 aspects were given ratings of either *Very satisfied* or *Extremely satisfied* by more than 70% of the students responding, with four of them exceeding 80%.

Viewed from the other end of the scale, the proportion of students giving a rating of either *Dissatisfied* or *Most dissatisfied* was less than 5% for all but two of the listed aspects. The two which exceeded this figure were *Assistance in linking ACE study to mainstream VET* (7%) and *Student facilities* (16%).

When students were invited to suggest changes to aspects with which they were dissatisfied, ten responses were received. Of these, only three were relevant, one suggested better access to computers and two wanted provision of, or improvements to, cafeteria service.

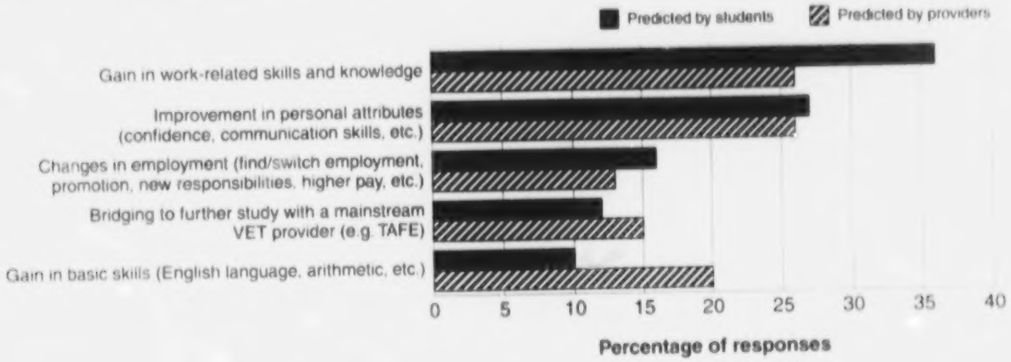
When asked to state any disadvantages associated with vocational learning through ACE, only 81 of the 383 students responded. Not all of the students wanted short courses and fast-paced learning. Some saw the fast pace at which their course progressed as a disadvantage, complaining that their course 'was too condensed', 'moved very quickly', 'was not long enough', or 'was too short'. Several students were disappointed that their course did not attract AUSTUDY, and one student observed that ACE teachers sometimes had to cater for a very 'broad group', presumably referring to students having a wide range of abilities and backgrounds. This, of course, is a characteristic of most groups of ACE students.

Provider views

For comparison, providers were asked to indicate what they thought were the most common outcomes gained by students from ACE vocational study. Their responses are shown in figure 7 in conjunction with the prediction responses of students which are repeated from figure 5. Comparison of the percentages shows general agreement on all but two outcomes: *Gain in basic skills* and *Gain in work-related skills and knowledge*.

Providers had higher expectations of *Gains in basic skills* than did students. A possible explanation for this may be that providers are more aware of the likelihood of students unconsciously improving basic skills as they learn the vocationally specific ones. For gains in work-related skills, the opposite was the case. Students had comparatively higher expectations than did providers.

Figure 7: Student–provider comparison of predicted student vocational learning outcomes



The outcome *Improvement in personal attributes* (which refers to items like organisational skills, communication skills, public speaking, confidence and assertiveness) was ranked equal first by providers and second by students. This element of ACE provision is obviously important—something ACE providers should not overlook in developing and promoting ACE VET—and something which could carry weight in any linking of ACE vocational study with mainstream VET. Indeed, it would seem ACE could be well positioned to be a leading provider of this type of vocational learning.

A side issue to this topic, raised by several commentators, was that labelling of competencies like communication skills as *soft* skills or *soft* outcomes tends to devalue them. Skills such as these can be very important in the workplace and are often sought by employers. In promoting these competencies, therefore, ACE should avoid connotations of softness.

In addition to being offered the same choice of predicted outcomes as students, providers were asked if *Improved prospects of finding employment* was likely to be a commonly gained outcome from ACE vocational study. Almost three-quarters (71%) of the providers agreed.

Improving ACE VET provision

Appropriateness of offering various categories of training

ACE offers various categories of vocational learning programs, including customised programs to suit individual students and organisations, industry and government-funded training, training in the workplace and training on the job. To identify which areas of vocational provision ACE should focus on, providers and students were asked to indicate which they believed would be the most appropriate category.

Provider opinions

Because there were marked differences between the opinions of respondents from NSW and those from SA providers, the results for the two States have been separated. They are given in figures 8 and 9. Although the SA sample was small, the differences are generally large enough to make comparison feasible.

Figure 8: NSW provider preferences for type of training (n=43)

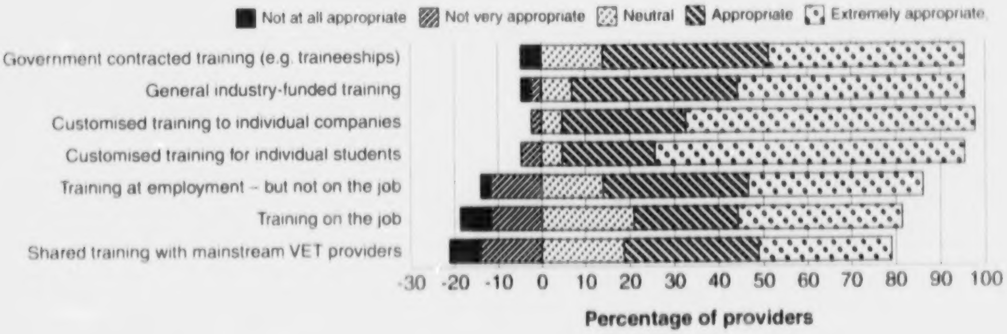
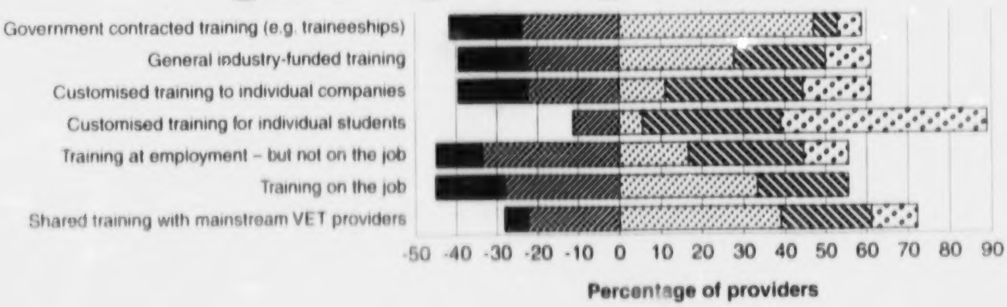


Figure 9: SA provider preferences for type of training (n=18)



General comparison of NSW and SA results showed that NSW providers tended to rate the appropriateness of most of the categories more highly than did their SA counterparts.

Between 60% and 91% of NSW providers rated all of the above categories as either *Appropriate* or *Extremely appropriate*. By comparison, all but one of the categories were similarly rated by only 11% to 39% of SA providers. The exception was *Customised training to meet individual student needs* which was highly rated by both groups (NSW 91%, SA 83%). As all of the categories are for *vocational* learning, these differences tend to support the argument that ACE in NSW is more strongly vocationally oriented than ACE in SA.

In NSW the categories most favoured (with more than 80% of providers rating them either *Appropriate* or *Extremely appropriate*) were: *Customised training under contract to individual companies* (93%), *Customised training to meet individual student needs* (91%), *General industry-funded training* (88%) and *Training under contract to government* (81%). As noted, in SA the only category that stood out to a similar degree was *Customised training to meet individual student needs* (83%).

While it could be expected, given the nature of ACE, that customised training, especially for individual students, would rate highly, it was rather surprising to find that providers, particularly in SA, did not rate training at the place of employment or on the job as strongly as some of the other categories. One reason suggested for this was the cost involved. If this is the case, it is a pity, because, with its inherent organisational flexibility and its popularity with learners, ACE would seem well suited to offering this type of training to industry.

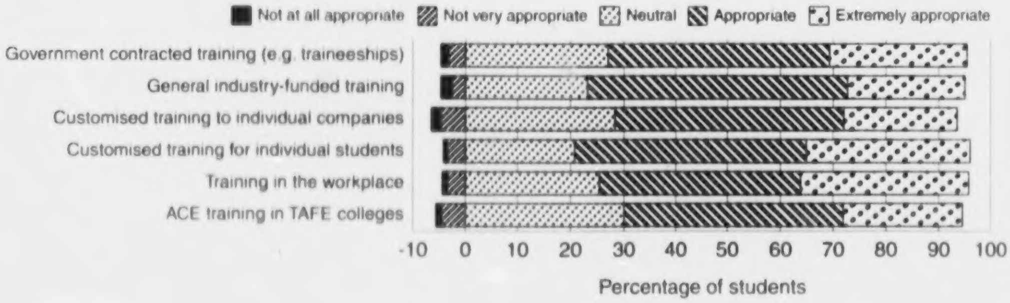
Earlier in this report it was indicated that the ability to provide 'short, sharp, snappy' courses was one of the perceived strengths of ACE. Some respondents suggested this as an area which ACE should not ignore, noting that short courses were what individuals and enterprises often wanted. 'ACE will be supplying components of packages because that is what people want. They don't want to tie themselves up for a long certificate course', said one respondent, 'Small employers have been found not to want to invest in long-term training', said another. However, another respondent cautioned against allowing short courses to be misused by providing learning which was not properly aligned to training packages and qualifications.

The above comments raise the question of whether ACE should be promoting 'full courses', or whether it should be highlighting the fact that the equivalent of a full course could be completed as a series of short courses which could lead to the same qualification.

Student opinions

Students, too, were asked to indicate what sort of vocational learning they thought ACE should provide. Six categories of training were listed (two of which were slightly different from those listed for providers) and, using the same rating scale as the providers, they were asked to rate the appropriateness of each as a part of ACE provision. The results, displayed in figure 10, show that, unlike providers, students consistently favoured all categories.

Figure 10: Student preferences for type of training



Targetting industry needs

In interviews, providers and industry representatives were asked to identify ways in which ACE could best contribute to vocational training. The following is a categorised summary of their responses.

Improving the standard of training in the field

Some interviewees saw ACE as having the potential to contribute to improvement in the quality of vocational training by:

- providing supervision, mentoring or tutoring in association with mainstream VET providers in regions which mainstream VET providers find difficult to service because of remoteness or other reasons

> *One of the things I have seen is that in certain regions of the State there is a lack of good quality training providers. If ACE could provide assistance in these regions, even in the form of tutoring or mentoring in association with a TAFE provider, this would be valuable.*
> (Employer association representative, NSW)

- using its expertise as an education broker or co-ordinator to act on behalf of the many highly skilled vocational training personnel who, having taken retirement packages, would like to work on a casual or part-time basis but lack the resources or skills to market their services

> *These days there are many retired TAFE teachers who have a lot of valuable knowledge and experience and are the sorts of people we would be looking for in training partnerships. However, they are not very good at marketing themselves and tying up deals—the administrative side of it. They are much better at working in a group. This is something ACE could look at [providing the administrative know-how and backup to enable them to market their skills].*
> (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

- provide trainer-training to industry, especially in remote areas

Introduction to VET

Some commentators stressed the need for ACE to continue providing courses which encourage and assist people to commence or return to vocational study, particularly those intimidated by mainstream vocational training organisations and the prospect of 'formal' study. The following is from a union representative:

> *There is certainly something needed in between TAFE and not doing a course at all, and that's where I think ACE fits in. [ACE] short courses give people a taste in a very non-threatening environment, I'd hate to see that lost.* (Union representative, SA)

In similar vein, an ACE manager described ACE's encouragement to people to learn and to appreciate the value of learning, as a *catalyst* to further learning in other sectors.

Another ACE manager described an innovative approach using the services of TAFE lecturers to help allay student fears of TAFE study:

> *Students are apprehensive about going [on] to a TAFE institution. The leader of the [ACE] group is organising for TAFE lecturers to come down to the centre and present some of the introductory TAFE lessons at the centre so that students, and volunteer tutors, don't feel so intimidated.*
> (ACE manager, SA)

ACE provision of training packages

The introduction of training packages has changed the nature of industry training in Australia. Individuals no longer have to enrol in major institution-based courses. Training can be undertaken in the workplace and on the job where appropriate. Previous learning and competencies already achieved can be given recognition and used for credit towards a qualification. Overall, this new system of training provides much greater flexibility, enabling learners to tailor their learning to the immediate needs of their jobs as well as to their long-term career needs.

For training packages to operate effectively there has to be good understanding and acceptance of the system by the providers, and the learners must be properly informed. ACE, with its flexibility and ability to adapt to change, its close affinity with students and its potential for communicating and interacting with local business—especially in smaller communities—should be able to capitalise on these assets to become a significant provider of training package-based learning.

> *ACE is probably in a better position to respond [to training packages] than most other sectors of the vocational training spectrum because, for many years ACE providers have been modularising and packaging training into short-course components for the market. ACE would have a very large pool of materials and course components that could be packaged for use in that way.*
> (ACE association representative, NSW)

> *There are a number of opportunities for ACE to access training packages, particularly at Certificate I and II levels, but even more specifically at the Mayer key competencies level which should be embedded in every training package. This could be a significant role for ACE.*
> (ITAB executive representative, SA)

However, training packages are designed to facilitate training and assessment in the workplace and on the job, and for that reason, are particularly well suited to workplace training. If ACE were to provide package-based training, it would need to consider carefully what workplace training would be required and how it might be accomplished. In this regard, ACE providers might be able to capitalise on their good relationships with local employers to arrange training in the workplace.

Flexible training

As noted in preceding sections of this report, flexibility is perceived as one of the hallmarks of ACE. It should come as no surprise therefore that the ability of ACE to provide flexibility in vocational learning was one of the aspects of ACE VET which featured prominently in relation to suggested targetting of industry needs by ACE.

More than three-quarters (77%) of providers indicated that ACE should target industry needs relating to flexibility in course provision—particularly, course structure, delivery format, timetabling and venue.

This view is supported by comments from industry itself, like the following from an ITAB representative:

> *Certainly, I think ACE could fill a gap as far as traineeship training goes—because they can offer it at night or the weekends—they are more able to go out and visit and do that sort of thing. It was because they were so well placed to do this sort of thing that we were so interested in working with them last year.*
> (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

An employer association representative also raised the possibility that ACE, with its greater flexibility, might be in a position to provide training to smaller groups than those acceptable to mainstream VET, possibly in the workplace if equipment resources were a problem.

Segmented training

One of the features of training frequently referred to in discussion of ACE VET is the ability of ACE to provide short, sharp, focussed courses. One commentator likened this to 'segmented training', going on to point out that, for economic as well as other reasons, there is likely to be a strong trend towards this style of delivery in the future. ACE, should be in a good position to meet the demand. But other vocational providers, too, will move towards this mode of delivery, thus diminishing one of the more discernible differences between ACE providers and typical mainstream VET providers.

> *There have been progressive changes in eligibility for incentive payments away from providing support for existing workers. The government is turning its effort on training into a labour market initiative rather than a skills and economic development initiative. As a consequence, as employers are forced to pay more and more they are going to be saying 'Do we really need to have our people doing this certificate at AQF level II, III, IV or V, as is now starting to come on stream. Do we need to invest that amount of money on training to AQF III level which could take eight or nine hundred hours and involve direct costs of eight or nine thousand dollars, let alone indirect costs.' What employers are going to do is go back to 'just in time' training [with provision of] a minimum of training.*
>
> *Instead of all bells and whistles training courses they will be wanting some training in personal development, problem-solving, leadership skills (particularly in a team-based work approach) and technical skills and knowledge such as in OH&S. And they will do it in bites. This type of training will be very similar to that which ACE might be offering—but to do it ... [ACE] will need to have people suitably qualified in workplace education, assessor training, occupational experience and technical knowledge.*
>
> *As training providers are given less and less access to government funding for delivery of certificated qualifications, they too are going to be pursuing this segmented training mode. This may result in ACE becoming little different to other RTOs—remembering that ACE providers will need to be RTOs to deliver these competencies.* (ITAB executive representative, SA)

Training via the Internet

Training via the Internet is a relatively new mode of vocational learning delivery. As much of it is computer-based and, in terms of capital equipment, relatively cheap to deliver, many ACE providers should be able to deliver such training, provided they have access to the expertise, suitable learning programs and the physical resources. Of course, in most programs it will also be necessary to observe the learner putting the knowledge and skills into practice. Here again, ACE with its broad regional coverage, should be in a better position than many mainstream VET providers to follow up this aspect of the training, particularly in outlying areas.

> *The Internet is going to be our greatest asset. We've already got the technology [in this college] to provide learning over the Internet. We've got the computers, we've got an expert who can do it, we've got one of the labs set up to provide external courses. We now need to look at how we write and conduct the courses—and whether we can afford to offer them. I think we can do it.*
> (ACE principal, NSW)
>
> *In our industry there are a lot of learning programs available on-line and through the Internet. Those sorts of programs still require a degree of personal contact. ACE could provide this.*
> (ITAB executive representative, SA)

Training partnerships with enterprises and assistance with workplace training

ACE, with its ability to develop close relationships with local enterprises, its strong regional presence, established educational background, and ability to recruit industry people with up-to-date knowledge and skills as trainers, should be able to develop partnerships with enterprises and assist them and their employees by providing training in the workplace. An ITAB representative summed it up as follows:

> *In central NSW we have examples where the local community college has entered into a training partnership—something we are very much into promoting. [In such a partnership] the RTO provides a mentor for mediated learning arrangements or on-site delivery, which may be partly or wholly in the enterprise or partly in the college.*

> *We are promoting training partnerships up here, principally because we have a lot of small businesses in regional and rural areas where they can't send a person to a TAFE college. In the partnership, the employer undertakes to have a qualified workplace trainer and assessor at the worksite, and the training provider, as the RTO, provides the mentor, being the qualified teacher. The qualified teacher does not have to be a subject expert as they currently insist on in the TAFE system. Instead they need a teaching qualification and special expertise in co-ordinating learning programs at worksites, which is something we understand ACE is capable of. The worksite provides the subject matter experts. So it could be that a single teacher will supervise program delivery for a range of VET qualifications from a range of training packages, as is done in the UK.*
>
> *There is an opportunity for ACE to make a major challenge in this area—not only outside the Sydney metropolitan area, but inside it as well.*
>
> *We also look to ACE in NSW for slightly different aspects of program delivery than the custom streamed programs for community education [ACE typically delivers]. ITABs generally tend to focus on delivery in workplaces, particularly outside the metro area. We are looking to ACE and others, private providers mostly, to assist us with co-ordinating program deliveries at worksites. So our focus, and certainly the first concern of enterprises will be for existing employees. Under our current structure in NSW it is very difficult to facilitate those programs because of [some reluctance in the TAFE sector].*
>
> *ACE is ideally suited to providing learning to existing employees. We would be asking ACE to look into entering into partnerships with employers at employment sites.*
>
> (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

However, if ACE wishes to do more in this area, it needs to ensure that the learning it presents is relevant to industry requirements and that students are properly informed of the nature of their course and where it can lead them. ITABs were nominated as important sources of advice on these issues.

> *If ACE goes into a workplace and provides training, the only complaints we ever get are that they are teaching the wrong stuff. We never get any complaints about the way they teach. On the other hand, if they teach it in a school hall or classroom, and then give out an industry qualification, we get complaints about everything. So their image is enhanced if they do it in the workplace and they do the right courses.* (ITAB executive representative, NSW)
>
> *When I came into the ITAB 11 years ago lot of TAFE programs were said to be industry based. It took us a while to re-categorise what were industry-specific programs from those which were self-enhancement. For example, we had really cloudy areas where people were doing dressmaking classes on a domestic sewing machine which was not relevant to working on industrial machines. If a person does training on a domestic sewing machine, they can't just move on to an industrial one—the nature of the work is completely different. As long as people are aware that some of the courses they do in ACE will not be suitable for employment in the [mainstream] industry, even though they may be suitable for 'cottage industry' purposes, the ITAB does not have a problem.*
>
> (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

ACE focus on individuals and businesses in the local community

Postcode analysis showed that businesses and other organisations which pay for people to attend ACE courses are located close to the ACE provider. When providers were asked if ACE should place a high priority on servicing the needs of individuals and businesses in local communities, almost all (98%) indicated that it should do so. One SA respondent commented: '[ACE] community centres are primarily a community resource for the local area'.

There can be little doubt that ACE provider personnel support most strongly the concept of locally focussed ACE provision. As discussed elsewhere in this report, the ability and willingness of ACE to provide this type of service is seen by providers, students and other interested parties as one of the strengths of ACE.

Entry-level training and job-seeking skills

Provision of training to enable individuals to gain entry-level qualifications in an industry, to provide them with job-seeking skills, to develop Mayer key competencies and, where necessary, to improve their skills in language and literacy, were all seen by project participants as vocational training areas in which ACE could make a significant contribution. Although this would tend to entrench the perception of ACE as a low-level provider, it is a role in which ACE is generally seen to excel. It is a category of learning provision which providers, in particular, felt should form an important part of ACE provision.

Management, office and interpersonal skills

ACE was seen as being well positioned to provide training for competencies like management, office administration and human relations—competencies which are becoming increasingly important in the workplace. The following is a list of some of the suggested areas:

- business management
- basic accounting
- communication
- computer packages (office and small business)
- report-writing
- supervision
- conflict resolution
- networking

These course areas were seen as being particularly suitable for ACE because they usually required little in the way of specialised equipment. In addition, the ability of ACE to operate flexibly and provide short, targetted courses was seen as an asset in courses of this nature: 'Whereas TAFE wants to run 6 month, 10 hours a week courses, ACE can offer the short, sharp, targetted course', said an ITAB representative.

Information technology

Because of the rapid rate of change in the area of information technology (IT) it was seen by several interviewees as one in which ACE could shine. It was suggested that ACE's flexibility gives it the capacity to employ tutors from industry with the latest knowledge and skills. Short, focussed courses designed to meet the specific needs of enterprise in areas such as introductory courses in Java, networking skills and vendor training could be offered by ACE.

> *I think that, in NSW, ACE is ideally placed in many ways to pick up the IT training package because they deliver short courses and they have got the flexibility. Whereas TAFE is like a big ship which is hard to move around, ACE is smaller and more flexible and adaptable. The industry wants short courses—but it hasn't happened. If some of the ACE colleges already interested in IT could become more focussed, they could certainly get a lot of business and I'd be happy to work closely with them.* (ITAB executive representative NSW)

Customised training

The organisational flexibility of ACE plus the wide-ranging availability of its teaching staff and currency of their expertise place ACE in a particularly strong position to provide customised training, as the following comment from an ACE co-ordinator illustrates.

> *There is an accredited hospitality course that people can do, but a lot of the locally based employers find that people learn a lot of airy-fairy things, so they asked us to give them an industry based course which [more closely met their needs]—they told us what they wanted in it. We are currently running one in basic bar service and we have just done one in MYOB* [Mind Your Own Business

> computer program]. *We can give people exactly what industry is looking for so they can get out and get a job. Although we follow an accredited curriculum and we fulfil all the competencies, we are able to be a little bit creative.*
>
> (ACE co-ordinator, NSW)

Vocational training for special groups

ACE has long been a provider of learning to special needs groups such as people with low language or literacy skills, people with low levels of schooling, women needing to re-enter the work force, indigenous groups, people with disabilities and job seekers. It has been said that, for many of these people, ACE learning plays an important role in breaking down barriers to vocational study. However, one provider pointed out that, despite the common perception of ACE as a significant provider for disadvantaged groups, ACE, in fact, is quite limited in what it can do.

> *It is a myth that ACE caters largely for disadvantaged groups. ACE is the organisation least capable of catering for these groups. ACE should be offering courses for them but is probably least able to do so. It's very expensive and we don't have the resources. The exception would be English language programs.* (ACE principal, NSW)

When providers were asked to rate how important it was for ACE to make special provision for these groups to undertake vocational study, just on three-quarters (76%) felt that it was either *Extremely important* or *Important*. Further analysis showed that NSW respondents tended to attach more importance to this type of provision than did their SA counterparts. When asked to nominate any groups that should be specially targetted, those most commonly cited were: people with low language or literacy skills, unemployed people, indigenous people, people with disabilities, women, and older people.

When students were similarly asked to rate how important they thought it was for ACE to offer vocational learning for groups with special needs, an even greater proportion (84%) indicated that such provision was either *Extremely important* or *Important*.

Formal training for apprentices and trainees

ACE already provides language, literacy and similar learning to apprentices who voluntarily seek assistance. In their questionnaires providers and students were asked if there were any ways in which ACE should extend its vocational provision into more formal training for apprentices. Their responses were mixed.

Of the 24 providers who responded, seven stated outright that ACE should not be involved in provision of training for apprentices and three had reservations about ACE involvement, one because of limitations in venues and equipment, and the others stating that trainees rather than apprentices should be a focus. Of those who were in favour of extending ACE VET for apprentices, five specified that it should be done in collaboration with trainers, employers, employer groups or other industry representatives. The others merely expressed general agreement with the concept.

Of the 36 responses received from students on this issue, 20 were in favour of some form of extension and ten were against, the others were indeterminate.

Noteworthy comments and suggestions from students who favoured ACE involvement in apprenticeship training referred to: ACE working with apprenticeship training providers; ACE working with group apprentice training schemes; ACE tutors assisting in the workplace; ACE developing strategic alliances with companies; and ACE covering areas which mainstream VET tended to treat cursorily—such as communication skills.

Students who were against ACE playing a formal role in apprenticeship training maintained that this type of training should be restricted to TAFE and that any access by apprentices to ACE should be voluntary.

Vocational learning for people affected by industry change

In today's society significant changes are taking place in the world of work. Paid employment is no longer accessible to everyone, multiple career changes are the norm, changes in employment are forced on people by circumstances out of their control and individuals are being forced to become more entrepreneurial.

For young people, this new era means they will be forced to consider options never contemplated by their parents: the need to acquire and extend their knowledge and skills through their own initiative rather than as part of their employment, the need to present well and sell their knowledge and skills to a potential employer or client, and the need, in some cases, to commence their working careers as self-employed individuals.

For older people, the changes can be bewildering, if not frightening. The need for change and retraining in an existing job, the need to compete more intensely for employment, and the prospect of self-employment as an alternative to no employment at all are the kinds of changes which may have to be faced at some time or other in today's world.

There can be little doubt that ACE has the potential to play a significant and important role in helping people cope with these challenges. The following cross-section of comments, from an employer association, an ITAB and a union, provide insight into how industry sees some of the issues involved.

> *In the future there will be an increasing likelihood that people will not be able to leave school and go into a full-time job, or even a part-time or casual job, they may need to create their own job, perhaps by starting out as a contractor. To do this, they will need to learn enterprise skills to enable them to look for, and take advantage of opportunities. In turn this will increase their employability. A lot of the skills are related to 'what's going on out there—how do I create a network of people'. The same skills will also be needed at the other end of the spectrum. Mature-age people, many of whom may be looking at 30–40 years of retirement will be looking to do something useful in their life. Provision of enterprise skills (together with lifelong learning) is an area that ACE should consider.*
>
> *People today, particularly in the 40–50 year age group are feeling the need to do something different, even if they are not being displaced or made redundant. They are feeling they need a change in their lives—there is a feeling of restlessness. But people don't know how to go about changing their careers, or they don't know what the options are. I think ACE has a role to play here too—just making people aware of what's happening in the world, what's happening out there and how their own skills and abilities can fit in. I put it under the broad heading of self-knowledge. A real understanding of yourself is important for a productive person and a productive society.*
> (Employer association representative, SA)
>
> *ACE could look at helping existing employees, for example those who fall in the 45–55 age group who have left their employment or been made redundant and are looking for employment in another field. In fact there are a number of cohorts of people who might be helped by the ACE network including critically long term unemployed, particularly in the 20–25 age group, and in some cases second generation unemployed, people of low socio-economic backgrounds, and the recently retired.*
>
> *ACE needs to be careful who or what it markets itself to. The best people to approach would be in the industry sectors that have experienced massive structural changes and changes to work practices such as the printing industry. The approach should be made by talking to employers—there are many employers out there who are wanting to keep staff that have been there a long time because they are valuable.* (ITAB executive representative, SA)
>
> *The need for programs for people wishing to brush up and expand their skills is probably less from people wanting to come into an industry than from people already in the industry who are losing their jobs, such as in an industry which is moving off shore so there are no further opportunities and they have to look elsewhere.* (Union representative, SA)

Provision of individualised learning for Centrelink customers

In providing government-funded VET, some ACE providers have focussed on catering for individualised learning for placement and self-referral students from Centrelink and employment agencies which use a case-management approach.

> *We have got five Centrelink offices in our immediate region and our contact with them has increased significantly over the last 12 months. We have a very good process going now with Centrelink officers giving their individual case clients authority to enrol. The enrolments are a result of our college formally approaching Centrelink. We would visit Centrelink on a regular basis and talk to officers, seeking their advice and letting them know about government-funded courses we were running, and we would send them our brochures.* (ACE principal, NSW)

Providers were asked in their questionnaire if this should be a significant focus of ACE. The responses indicated that this was one of the few issues for which there was no clear trend. Just over half (51%) felt that it should be a significant focus leaving 49% who felt it should not.

Risks associated with the move into vocational learning

Not everyone was completely at ease with ACE moving into VET. Some respondents to the provider questionnaire expressed concerns about issues like: ACE being pushed into VET as a means of obtaining additional funding, traditional ACE students being disadvantaged, ACE merely becoming a cheap source of VET learning, and ACE losing its educational purpose.

ACE VET information

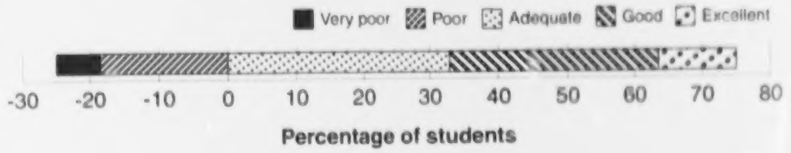
This section deals with the effectiveness of ACE in disseminating information about the vocational programs it provides. It begins by looking at the level of awareness of ACE VET as an indicator of effectiveness—first for students, then providers and finally industry. This is followed by discussion of the types of vocational program information provided by ACE and the channels through which it is disseminated.

Awareness of ACE VET

Student awareness

When students were asked to rate the adequacy of their personal knowledge of ACE vocational education provision, well over a third (42%) rated it as *Excellent* or *Good*, about a third (33%) rated it as *Adequate* and a quarter (25%) as *Poor* or *Very poor*. These results are shown in figure 11.

Figure 11: Student self-rating of knowledge about ACE vocational choices



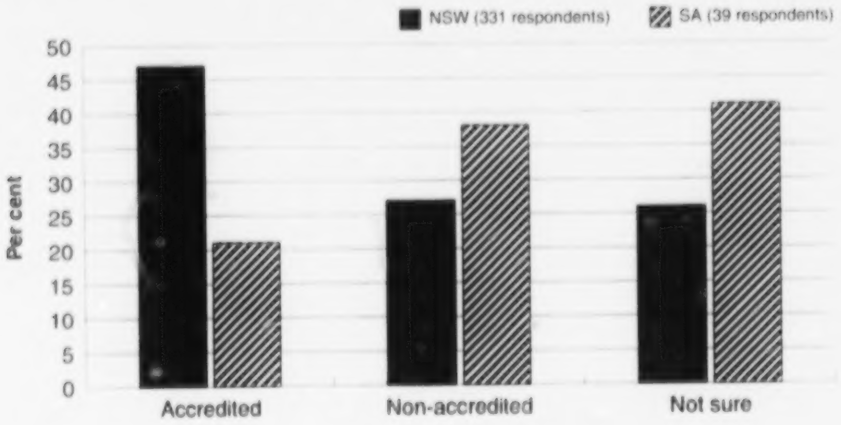
Students were also asked two questions about credit transfer: firstly, whether they were aware of the existence of credit transfer before they enrolled for ACE study, and secondly, whether availability of credit transfer would influence their decision to study with ACE. Just over three-quarters (76%) said they were not aware of any provisions for credit transfer and close to half (43%) said that awareness of credit transfer provisions would influence their decision to enrol.

The responses to these questions lead to the inference that significant numbers of prospective students are not receiving information which could be vital in determining whether or not they pursue ACE vocational study.

When students were asked if the course they were studying was accredited, just over a quarter (26%) of the NSW students and well over a third (41%) of the SA students were not sure (see figure 12), suggesting that this aspect of ACE course provision could be more clearly stated in ACE course information. However, it should be noted that some providers have indicated in responses and interviews that they did not actively promote the fact that a course was accredited because it tended to 'scare students off'. This may account for some of the apparent lack of student awareness.

As an interesting sidelight, the results in figure 12 also show that a far greater proportion of NSW students reported that their course was accredited than did those from SA (47% in NSW, 21% in SA). This difference probably reflects what some respondents referred to as the 'softer' vocational emphasis in SA ACE.

Figure 12: Student responses re course accreditation



Provider awareness

ACE providers should be expected to play a vital role in the provision of information to students relating to credit transfer and other aspects of ACE–mainstream VET linkages. However, when providers were asked to rate the knowledge of relevant ACE staff about mainstream VET provision and credit transfer options almost half (48%) indicated either *Poor* or *Very poor* and a further third (35%) indicated the mid-scale rating of *Adequate*. The consensus amongst ACE providers, therefore, was that about half of the ACE personnel who deal with students have inadequate knowledge of information important to students who wished to link their ACE studies with mainstream VET. Indeed, one student reported that: 'contract teachers [in ACE] were rarely provided with information relating to credits and RPL'.

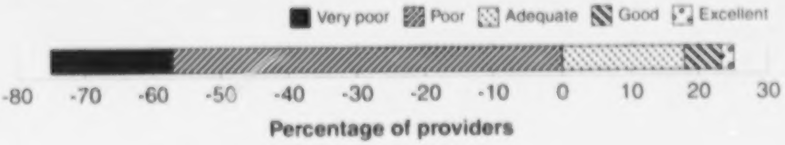
On the other hand, providers' general knowledge of ACE VET was higher. When asked to indicate if they knew of any programs offered by ACE that were similar to mainstream VET (for example, programs similar to those offered by TAFE), almost two-thirds (63%) said they did, citing *Computing, Information technology, Business administration, Workplace training, Teaching, Childcare, Nursing* and *Hospitality* as examples. When asked if their ACE organisation offered accredited courses 85% indicated it did.

ACE perceptions of mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET

While this study was not designed to investigate mainstream VET staff awareness of ACE VET provision and linkages, it was of interest to know how their awareness was perceived by ACE providers. When asked to rate mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET provision, 75% of ACE providers indicated either *Poor* or *Very poor*, and 18% indicated *Adequate*. The results are summarised in figure 13. In the eyes of ACE personnel, it seems, mainstream VET provider staff do not have adequate knowledge of ACE vocational programs and credit transfer options. There were no marked differences between the two States; however, in both States, managers tended to be more critical than co-ordinators who, in turn, were more critical than teaching staff.

Strategies for increasing mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET are discussed later in this report.

Figure 13: ACE opinion of mainstream VET knowledge of ACE VET



Industry training advisory bodies (ITABs)

Not all ITABs were familiar with ACE. In some cases this may have been because ACE providers did not offer training specifically for their industry sectors (most likely because their training was predominantly technical, highly specialised, or required expensive equipment). ITABs in NSW generally appeared more aware of ACE than those in SA, possibly reflecting a stronger emphasis on vocational training in NSW ACE.

For some ITAB personnel, knowledge of ACE arose from personal experience, for instance undertaking ACE study themselves, rather than through formal contact between ACE and the ITAB (respondents from industry organisations other than ITABs commented similarly).

Where ITAB knowledge of ACE VET did exist, it came through ITAB approaches to ACE as well as ACE approaches to ITABs. For example, one ITAB representative visited ACE centres to explain and discuss a new training package. Another described how the ITAB sought to work co-operatively with ACE providers in regional and remote areas:

> *We try to develop links with RTOs who deliver programs to [our industries] in NSW, and ACE plays a role here in regional and remote communities. Where we know of initiatives taking place in particular regional areas we will sometimes refer people to ACE colleges as a way of stimulating a market beyond that offered by TAFE.* (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

In NSW, BACE appears to have been quite active in marketing ACE to some ITABs. Usually, it seems, this has been done through BACE organised meetings and forums to which ITAB representatives have been invited.

> *The Board [BACE] has made quite an effort over the past couple of years to develop contacts with ITABs and they have actually held summit meetings with the ITAB network here—presenting the case for the Board, particularly in rural areas of NSW.* (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

Employers and employer bodies

If ACE is to make any contribution of significance to VET, there must be awareness of ACE VET in the workplace, not only by employees, but by employers as well. When ACE providers and industry personnel were asked to comment on employer awareness of ACE, their responses suggested that employers generally lacked any substantial awareness of the role ACE is playing, or could play, in vocational education. 'We are constantly getting feedback when we get a new business on board that they either did not know we existed, or did not know what we did', said one ACE principal.

Some commentators also pointed out that knowledge of ACE was likely to be influenced by the size of the organisation and the nature of the community in which it was located. Smaller businesses and those located in regional or country centres were more likely to have had contact with ACE than larger or urban-based businesses. There appeared to be several reasons for this: the types of courses offered by ACE suited small business operators better, the small business operators were more in touch with their local communities, and ACE often has a stronger presence in regional communities than mainstream VET.

As business support organisations and representatives of employers, employer chambers, chambers of commerce, business centres and similar bodies have the potential to increase awareness of (and possibly even promote) ACE VET to employers. But to do this, the employer bodies must, themselves, be aware of what ACE has to offer. When spokespersons for employer bodies were asked what they and other representatives of their organisations knew of ACE VET, it was found that awareness of ACE VET was generally limited.

> *I think our Board would know [very little] about ACE—and these are senior people in industry. Our training administrators and our trainers would know a little bit, but to my knowledge they don't have any direct interaction.* (Employer association representative, SA)

> *[Our organisation's] knowledge of ACE vocational provision is very patchy. Some [of our people] in their local regions have struck up associations with ACE and they know a little about what is going on, but not in a comprehensive way. Until I moved into this position I didn't know they offered VET courses. And most people I have spoken to don't seem to know that either.*
> (Employer association representative, NSW)

Increased knowledge of ACE VET would place these organisations in a better position to advise and assist the employers they represent.

If ACE VET is to operate with maximum effectiveness, it is important that credit transfer and pathways not only be available but that their existence be well known. Responses from industry personnel suggest that industry generally knows little about credit transfer and pathways that do exist. Furthermore, there is a general lack of understanding of the concepts. This would particularly apply to the small employers and employees who are unlikely to be familiar with educational concepts and terminology.

Unions

Since the role of unions is centred on the welfare of employees, it was expected that they would have an interest in vocational education opportunities available to them. Participants in this study (including union spokespersons) were therefore invited to comment on their perceptions of union awareness and activity in relation to ACE VET.

Overall, general opinion was that unions were largely unaware of ACE VET. The awareness that did exist appeared to be mainly derived from staff experience of ACE gained on a personal basis. It was pointed out that, by and large, unions were more concerned with training related to industrial matters such as occupational health and safety (OH&S) and leadership than that related to the technical aspects of the work an employee performed.

Types of information provided

Providers were asked to indicate what types of information were generally provided to prospective students. *Course listings*, *Course content* and *Timetabling* were each chosen by a large proportion of the providers who responded (92%, 89% and 84% respectively). However, only 23% indicated their organisation provided information on *Credit transfer options and procedures*. Lack of this information may result in students enrolling in mainstream VET when their preference for initial vocational study might have been ACE VET instead. A loss to ACE and unnecessary disappointment for the students.

When providers were asked to state who, within the organisation, provided the information to students, the most common responses (listed in order of frequency) were:

- teaching staff
- administration staff
- program co-ordinators

The dissemination methods frequently mentioned by the providers were:

- in-person discussions with students
- leaflets and brochures
- telephone
- mail
- print media
- electronic media (internet, email, fax)

Surprisingly, only one of the 55 respondents to the question mentioned information sessions—a mode of information provision commonly used in mainstream VET.

Provider interviews gave further insight into the means used to communicate vocational course information to industry and some of the difficulties encountered. The following is a sample:

> *The main way we make contact with industry at the moment is through our brochures where employees see something and go to their boss saying they would like to do it, or through word of mouth where one employee does a course then tells others. We are not resourced to go out and talk to industry or ring up employers. Some tutors do things off their own bat and arrange for a set of brochures to be sent out next time around. It's good that they do it—we just have to rely on them at the moment.* (ACE principal, NSW)

> *What we did was to employ a person to go out and sell our courses. The proviso was they had to cover their own wage after which they moved on to a commission basis. That has worked very well, but you have got to get the right type of person. The young woman who is doing it now is exceptional. Her approach is: 'If you want to do it, whatever it is, we will either develop the program or find someone who already has it'.* (ACE principal, NSW)

> *We print 100 000 copies of the college brochure each term. 80 000 are letter-box distributed. The remaining 20 000 are mailed to past students, and distributed to libraries, community centres, businesses, doctors' surgeries, TAFE institutes and schools. For special training courses like contracted training provision or traineeships we have individual fliers and advertise in the local press.* (ACE principal, NSW)

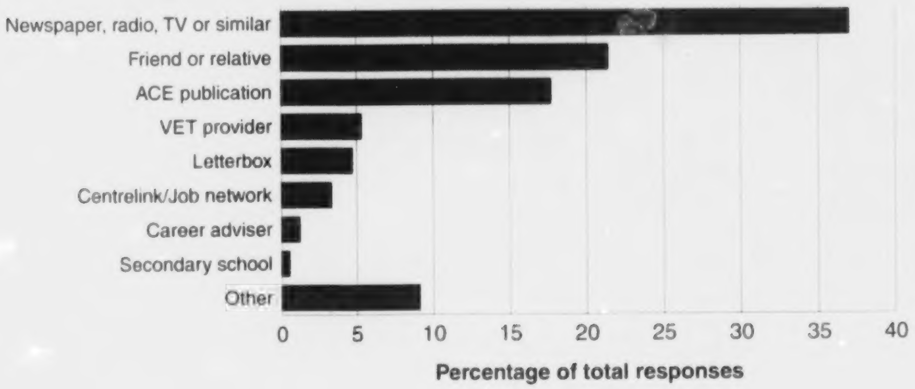
Sources of information

Students

When students were asked to indicate how they found out about their courses, over a third (37%) of students nominated the media (newspaper, radio, TV or similar), and about a fifth nominated friends or relatives (21%), or an ACE publication (brochures, leaflets, newspaper inserts) (18%). Figure 14 shows the results for all the information sources listed in the question.

Some students indicated they were continuing on from previous enrolments: 'I have undertaken many of their courses over the past five years'. Other comments were: 'I thought it was good that one organisation would promote another's course' (apparently referring to cross-promotion between ACE and mainstream VET) and '[It was] part of a redundancy package'. The last comment reminds us that ACE could have a role to play in providing vocational education to redundant employees, many of whom need to extend their knowledge and skills but may be uncomfortable about returning to 'formal' study.

Figure 14: How students found out about their ACE course



Industry bodies

In interviews, industry bodies comprising employer associations, ITABs and unions were asked what ACE vocational information they received and where it came from. Responses suggest that there is little concerted effort by ACE to provide vocational program information to industry. Apart from the generic ACE brochures that fortuitously found their way to industry or were noticed in the media (particularly those from WEA), the only other significant source mentioned was through contact initiated by the industry bodies.

> *From time to time one sees programs that are advertised in the media and that would be about the only time people would be aware of what's going on, other than by word of mouth.* (Employer association representative, SA)

> *Occasionally a consultant will [bring in] some information they have obtained in the field, which tends to be brochures.* (Employer association representative, NSW)

> *We seldom get information about programs promoted by ACE—if there are any [ACE] shortcomings in NSW, that is probably one of them. They have a website, [but it is mainly about community education] which we are not generally interested in. We have [also] had some familiarisation meetings with ACE in NSW. ACE needs to market [its vocational programs] more aggressively.* (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

> *We don't get any information sent to us by ACE. However, I have gained some useful knowledge from speaking to a number of ACE personnel last year in the course of a series of visits to regional and metropolitan ACE centres to explain and discuss a training package.* (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

> *We receive information about ACE from three sources: the Board of Adult and Community Education, phone calls from individual ACE colleges about particular matters (around once a week), or a person or another training organisation or an employer rings up about a problem or a complaint about ACE.* (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

Improving ACE VET information

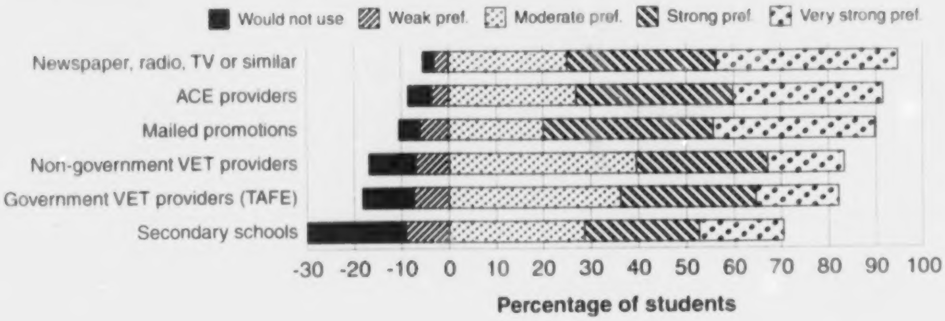
Preferred information sources and formats

Having determined how ACE vocational course information actually reached its intended audience, this study also sought to determine how people thought the information should be provided. Students, providers and industry representatives were asked through questionnaire or interview to indicate their preferred sources and formats for such information.

Student preferences

When students were asked to rate their preferences for various sources of information about ACE VET, their most common responses were print or electronic media, followed by direct receipt from ACE providers and mailed promotions. Detailed results, ranked in overall order of preference are given in figure 15.

Figure 15: Sources of ACE vocational information preferred by students



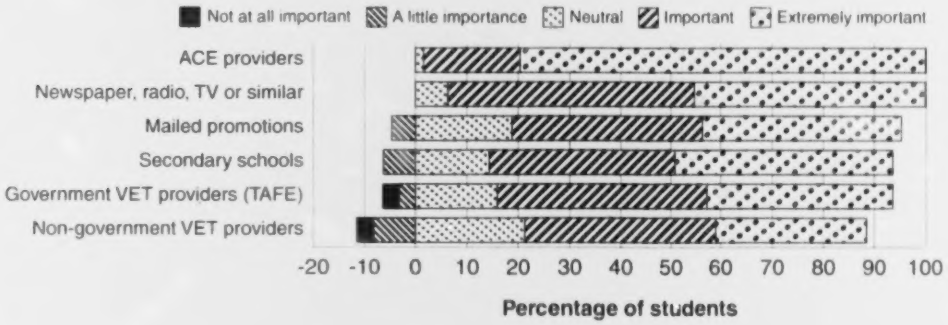
Interestingly, 20% of respondents indicated they *Would not use* secondary schools as an information source whereas only 2% to 11% of respondents said the same thing of the other sources. The most likely reason for this is that the ages and backgrounds of ACE students are such that they have little contact with secondary schools.

Provider preferences

Providers also were asked to rate the importance of various organisations and other avenues as sources of information about ACE VET. Like the students, they gave their strongest ratings to print or electronic media, direct receipt from ACE providers and mailed promotions. Figure 16 depicts the pattern of results.

Comparing the provider rankings with those of the students, there was one notable difference: secondary schools were seen as a more important source of ACE vocational information by providers than by students. As noted above, most of the students surveyed were well out of secondary school by the time they were in ACE vocational courses and this probably affected their preference. However, it seems that providers see a need to inform secondary school students of the ACE VET option, even though few presently move straight from school to ACE. With the introduction of VET-in-Schools programs, there is likely to be heightened school student interest in vocational learning, so ACE would be wise to consider raising awareness in the secondary sector of what ACE can offer—either by working collaboratively with schools or through other means.

Figure 16: Provider ratings of importance of information sources



Providers were also asked to nominate avenues, other than those listed in the question, through which ACE vocational course information might be disseminated. The five most noteworthy suggestions were:

- relevant ACE administrative/co-ordinating bodies (for example, BACE in NSW, Adult and Community Education Unit in SA)
- the Internet, which has the potential to be reached by increasing numbers of people in the community, including employees, employers and industry representatives
- district councils, which are often central sources of information to local communities
- industry bodies (such as ITABs and employer organisations)
- Centrelink, which, because of its role, could be in a position to pass on ACE vocational course information to individuals needing to recommence vocational study or prepare themselves for entry to the workforce, particularly those lacking the confidence and self-esteem needed to enter into mainstream study

Industry body preferences

If ACE wishes to promote its vocational provision to industry for the benefit of industry and its employees, it should look closely at how it might direct vocational program information to industry bodies. The following is a summary of comments from industry representatives regarding preferred information channels and information content.

When asked to indicate the format in which they would prefer to receive ACE vocational information most industry respondents mentioned use of electronic media either in the form of email, or to a lesser extent websites. Electronic media was popular because information could be distributed to interested parties at the touch of a button, it could be put on a website for other people to access, and it is relatively cheap and easy to keep up to date.

The second most popular choice was paper-based information, including leaflets and other ACE publications, advertisements and inserts in the press, mailed information, and faxed information. However, one respondent noted that paper-based publications were best suited for basic information, and that where detailed information was required, electronic media was more useful.

A common theme of many responses was that the information be presented in a consolidated form; that is, covering all ACE providers, all courses and all locations (an electronically based document might be particularly appropriate). The consolidated approach was preferred because industry representatives did not want to be inundated with numerous documents they would not have time to read. In the ACE system as it presently exists, consolidation on a State rather than national basis would seem to be the most logical approach.

Some respondents asked that communication should be supplied regularly, such as each semester or year, supplemented by *ad hoc* communications for specific purposes.

A number of industry respondents favoured a 'direct' approach, meaning person-to-person interaction. This could include individual personal contact in which an ACE representative met with someone from the organisation concerned, or information sessions in which a group of ACE representatives met with industry representatives. The direct approach was seen as a good way of gaining the attention of industry representatives and generally acquainting them with the philosophy of ACE and its overall range of vocational learning. It was also suggested that a 'face-to-face' approach would be particularly effective for contact with small businesses where it is necessary to deal directly with the employer and employees. Direct contact was also seen to have better potential for promoting a favourable image and establishing a working relationship.

The use of case studies was also mentioned by one respondent. This approach could be useful in that it could present examples of the ways ACE could assist employees and employers with a particular enterprise or industry.

An SA respondent suggested contact be made with business enterprise centres which have a strong network in the business community for provision of advice on learning programs and other assistance.

Improving promotion of ACE and its vocational courses

Participants in this study offered a wide range of ideas on how ACE could improve promotion of its courses and its image as a vocational provider. The following is an extended compilation of strategies developed from their ideas. They have been grouped under four headings:

- Improving information and information access
- Improving promotion of ACE as an entity
- Improving ACE staff knowledge of ACE VET and linkages with mainstream VET
- Improving mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET and credit transfer

Improving information and information access

As illustrated in the first part of this section, questionnaire respondents and interviewees identified many ways in which they believed ACE vocational information provision needed to be improved. The following are some examples.

Consolidated regular communications to industry bodies

Regular communications on ACE VET to industry bodies such as employer associations, ITABs and unions were suggested. A consolidated format was preferred because industry commentators indicated they would be unlikely to read large numbers of communications from individual ACE providers. Annual or half yearly communication was commonly suggested.

Use of electronic media

There were numerous suggestions advocating the use of electronic media as a means of communicating information about ACE VET to the general public, to the educational sector and to industry. Internet websites could be developed for the ACE sector on a national, State, and individual provider basis. Whereas websites are passive, in the sense that they only provide information on demand, information could also be actively disseminated by email where appropriate. As has been recommended elsewhere for other aspects of vocational provision, ACE should seek professional guidance in development of websites and other electronic means of information dissemination.

Use of case studies

It was suggested that appropriate case studies be used in promotional materials as examples of the way in which ACE, through collaboration with industry bodies, enterprises and mainstream VET, can contribute to vocational training.

Promotion of ACE VET to non-vocational students

For many people, initial knowledge of ACE VET comes through personal experience, either as a student in non-vocational courses, or through contact with someone who has been an ACE student. If ACE wishes to increase awareness of its vocational provision it should pursue opportunities to publicise its vocational courses through students undertaking general interest and other non-vocational courses. Many of these students may already be involved in industry either in an official capacity or as an employee, others may have family or friends who could benefit from ACE vocational study.

Matching communication to nature of the enterprise

If ACE wishes to increase industry awareness of its vocational provision, it should target two types of business enterprises with two levels of communication. For the (generally) smaller enterprises, contact needs to be aimed directly at employers and employees who may have very little knowledge of training matters and awareness of ACE and who are unlikely to be familiar with training concepts and educational terminology. For larger enterprises the communication is likely to be with a designated human resources or personnel manager who often has training experience and qualifications and because of this, may even know something of ACE.

The image projected by an ACE organisation can also have an effect on its acceptance by industry. In dealing with small enterprises, for example, one provider found it a particularly successful strategy to portray their organisation as being similar to a small business, saying: 'Rather than appear to small businesses as a large organisation, we actually say "Listen, we are small business too, we know what your problems are"'.

Participation in special initiatives and industry programs

Awareness of ACE VET can also be boosted significantly by participation in special initiatives and industry programs. In regional areas, for example, some ACE providers have become involved in FarmBis and Landcare programs. ACE should not overlook these opportunities for introducing ACE vocational training to new markets and generally promoting the image of ACE.

Promotion of pathways, linkages and credit transfer

Responses from industry representatives suggested that industry generally has a poor understanding of the concepts of ACE–mainstream VET pathways, linkages and credit transfer and knows little about the options that exist. Because pathways, linkages and credit transfer can be so important to ACE vocational students, ACE providers should ensure these aspects are explained and promoted as part of ACE VET.

Promotion to unions

Unions were said to be more concerned with training related to industrial matters such as OH&S and leadership than to the technical aspects of the work an employee performs. In promoting vocational provision to unions, therefore, ACE should draw attention to programs focussing on leadership, communication, report-writing, negotiation skills, OH&S and other skills relevant to union interests.

Promotion to re-deployed and redundant employees

People who, because of redeployment or redundancy, need further training (or even retraining for a different occupation) are often uncomfortable about returning to 'formal' study with mainstream VET. Many have not studied for some years and are afraid of being found unable to cope. ACE can offer these people an opportunity to re-enter vocational study in a friendly, supportive and relatively informal environment. When marketing vocational provision to the community and to the workforce, and particularly to groups likely to contain high proportions of redeployed and redundant individuals, ACE should ensure these characteristics are prominently featured.

Improving promotion of ACE as an entity

Apart from a need to improve the content and quality of information about ACE vocational courses, many participants in this study also saw a need to improve and consolidate the image ACE presents as a provider of vocational learning. The following are some of the strategies suggested to develop and promote the image of ACE as a serious and capable vocational provider and highlight advantages and benefits of ACE VET.

Need for ACE to be placed higher on political agendas

For ACE VET to be better recognised and accepted by industry and the general community it is important that it receive, and be seen to receive, endorsement by government. Comments received from interviewees and respondents suggest that ACE regional, State and national ACE bodies could help to achieve this through concerted lobbying for recognition (and resources).

> *We need to get ACE on the federal political agenda. Until federal politicians realise what ACE is and how many people access ACE centres throughout the country, and what they achieve through ACE, it is very difficult to bring about any change.* (ACE principal, NSW)

However, to maximise the effectiveness of such a strategy it is important that the image projected by ACE through these bodies be one which is consistent and cohesive. With this in mind, ACE councils and other ACE bodies should look closely across the spectrum of ACE organisations at the way ACE is portrayed.

Branding

In today's world, brand names, acronyms and logos are used to identify products, organisations and services. If they are well publicised and are identified with a particular product, body or service, they work well. In the field of vocational education, for example, most people in Australia know what TAFE signifies, even if they do not know what the acronym stands for. But if the significance of an acronym or logo is not publicised, its impact and value are lost (it was noted, incidentally, that in SA there was no reference to Adult and Community Education under the 'ACE' acronym in the telephone directory).

> *People don't know we are ACE, most just know us as an evening college. The term ACE is little used by students, it's mainly used by the bureaucracy ... There are probably more people calling us TAFE than ACE.* (ACE principal, NSW)

Of course, a drawback of the ACE acronym is that it is commonly used in connection with a wide range of products and services, so if it were to be used to identify a particular type of vocational learning it would need to be strongly marketed.

A number of interviewees and questionnaire respondents advocated use of the title 'Adult and Community Education' and the ACE acronym in marketing—what some refer to as 'branding'.

> *It would help to promote better awareness of ACE if all ACE providers began the name of their organisation with 'ACE', such as ACE SouthEast. This would be a branding exercise to promote a more uniform image.* (ACE principal, NSW)
>
> *[As long as] we don't have* ACE *in our [organisation] name or have it stamped on our information material, awareness of us as ACE is going to take a long time to come. I think a title like:*
>
> ***SouthEast Suburbs College****
>
> *of Adult and Community Education*
>
> *would be good. In it the local nature of the organisation and the fact that it is a college is highlighted in the upper part of the title, and the fact that it is an ACE organisation is indicated below.* (ACE principal, NSW)
>
> (*Name changed to preserve anonymity.)

An ACE figurehead

In the context of promoting ACE VET, some commentators supported a suggestion that the services of a high-profile person be obtained to act as an ACE figurehead for promotional purposes on television, on radio, and in the print media. This could be undertaken on either a national or State basis by the relevant ACE bodies. A national or State promotion would seem preferable, since few individual providers would have the resources to effectively put the idea into practice and also because the rights to use the 'figurehead' would be owned by ACE and would therefore be a resource available to all ACE providers.

The person selected to act as a figurehead would need to be chosen carefully so as to appeal both to the vocational and non-vocational elements of the educational market catered for by ACE.

Need for professional assistance in ACE promotion

One of the most obvious outcomes of this study was the significant variation in perceptions of what ACE was, and more specifically, what ACE VET was. Quite clearly, ACE has an 'image' problem. Many people are either unsure what ACE does or have misconceptions about it. Part of this results from the large variations in the nature of ACE providers and the learning they provide. What is needed is a consistent style of promotion which explains the various facets of ACE and presents the options available to learners. To achieve this there may need to be some revision of ACE promotional strategies.

To varying extents, all providers undertake their own promotion, producing brochures, conducting letter drops and visiting prospective organisations. Some providers essentially do it on their own, others are assisted by their representative ACE bodies. If ACE is to promote a more consistent image, there could be benefit in providers sharing their knowledge and experience in this context and being given access to professional training and advice on techniques of promotion. However, more may need to be done if an enhanced understanding of ACE and promotion of ACE learning is to be achieved on a Statewide or national basis.

Comments from various participants in this project suggested that if the ACE 'brand name' is to be promoted with maximum effectiveness it should be done professionally. The inference made from these comments was that, from an ACE 'image' perspective, a uniform professional promotion would be more effective on a Statewide or national basis than a conglomeration of promotions by individual providers. This is not to say that individual providers should not undertake their own promotional activities locally, but rather, that the image of ACE VET, and understanding of it, would best be served by a combination of broad-

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based professional promotion of ACE vocational services coupled with local promotions by ACE providers, preferably with access to professional advice and assistance.

> *I think ACE in NSW is poorly structured to market the products it offers. If you were to let ACE loose in NSW with a proper marketing effort, ACE would become a major player within VET in three years. I think ACE has got a big future if it can only develop its identity.*
> (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

> *We've put quite a bit of money into a PR or a 'branding' project in metropolitan regions. One of our findings from that was that providers don't understand the process—they don't understand how PR and branding actually works, they don't understand the techniques that are used. So if they don't see their college name up in lights, they don't see that it's got any value. There is an education issue there for us.* (ACE administration representative, NSW)

Promotion of ACE as a vocational provider

Even if ACE is well known as an educational provider in the community it may still not be associated with vocational education. Promotion of ACE in relation to vocational courses therefore should emphasise the vocational nature of ACE course provision and, where applicable, the fact that the ACE provider is a registered training organisation.

> *More needs to be done to promote ACE vocational provision to the community. There is still a perception that ACE is yoga, ballroom dancing and calligraphy.*
> (WEA executive representative, NSW)

> *... perhaps ACE providers should mention in their brochures that they are RTOs and that they are part of the VET system.* (ACE association representative, NSW)

> *Whilst it is good that ACE is seen as a friendly, informal organisation, the down-side is that ACE still has to battle the image of a hobby course and evening course provider. ACE does not have a generic Australia-wide name like 'TAFE'. Instead the name [and image of ACE] varies across States. Some ACE organisations are finding that even a name change, such as dropping 'community' out of the title or using the [title] 'business training section' results in them accessing a different market—because people don't want to go to a community college. However, in other contexts, the word community is very valuable so it should not be lost.*
> (ACE association representative, NSW)

Central resources and responsibility in ACE promotion

Providers often commented that they alone did not have the resources to properly conduct promotion of vocational training. What was often suggested was some form of centralised general promotion that local providers could tap into or supplement.

> *In NSW at this stage every individual ACE college does its own promotion and marketing. It's a very expensive exercise—ours is $100 000 a year, for example. The obvious thing is that the stuff that is designed to generally promote the image of ACE should not be done separately, while the individual colleges, with their knowledge of how to access their local populations, should be left to handle the local promotion. The general ACE image [promotion] should be done centrally because colleges don't have the time or the expertise to handle it—a lot of what is done [by colleges] is well intentioned amateurism.*

> *... In the local paper, we can afford to put in a little advertisement. Right next to ours is almost a full page TAFE one. That's where the difference in resources shows. And they are advertising the same types of programs, side by side, one to one.* (ACE principal, NSW)

> *The BACE published an insert in the* Sydney Morning Herald *which listed all courses of all ACE colleges. The response was great, but it has not been done as a regular thing. Our (ACE) sector should do this regularly, say four times a year. Our local profile is very good as a result of our college's own efforts, but individual colleges can only do so much. ACE needs a Statewide or even Australia-wide identity. Our co-ordinating bodies should look at this.* (ACE principal, NSW)

Increased profile with local small business

Many people believe ACE makes a valuable contribution to the community by providing middle-level vocational education to local small businesses. The report *ACE and small business in New South Wales* (Kinnaird & Davis 1998) which looked at the interaction between ACE and small business indicates that in NSW, at least, quite a lot had already been accomplished in this area.

In the current study, providers were asked if ACE should pursue a goal of raising its profile with small business at the local level with a view to expanding this area of VET. A large majority (94%) indicated that it should. However, a number of respondents indicated that cost was an inhibiting factor—as much as they would like to pursue it, they could not afford to.

Promotional assistance from industry

To promote its vocational learning provision effectively, ACE should consider seeking the assistance of industry groups or bodies who may be able to help in various ways; for example, by advising on the types of vocational education required, and therefore which should be promoted; by providing endorsement of the learning programs offered; and by assisting in the distribution of ACE vocational information. When providers and industry representatives were asked to suggest particular industry groups and bodies that should be approached for assistance, they favoured the following.

ITABs

As the educational advisors to industry, ITABs were, not surprisingly, commonly suggested by interviewees as an important contact for ACE providers wishing to promote ACE VET to industry. ITABs could be expected to provide valuable advice concerning vocational learning required by industry as well as assisting in its promotion. One suggestion of interest, which came from an ITAB representative, was that ITABs might act as training brokers.

> *The nature of the industry is very important. In a [manufacturing] industry as established and regulated as ours, being an area that is fairly heavily unionised with fairly set training patterns, the first port of call should be some sort of discussion with the ITABs, to see where ACE fits in. In our industry, most [learning] forms credit units towards wage increases and classification changes. If they are not recognised by the national competency system they don't get a look in. So if ACE is going to promote these sorts of programs it is going to have to first talk to the ITABs. Then it can next go to the unions and employer organisations.* (Union representative, NSW)

> *If ACE had something useful to offer, the ITAB would be happy to assist by distributing information through its networks. We have a website and I'm happy to put up anything useful on it.* (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

One ITAB representative pointed out that because ITABs had limited resources they could not be expected to interpret and re-organise information supplied by ACE in order to disseminate it to industry. The inference was that, unless ACE provided information which accorded with training policies and was in a format that was readily useable, ITABs would not be likely to do much with it.

Employer associations

Employer associations (such as Australian Business organisations, and Chambers of Commerce) were often cited as bodies which might be of assistance in promoting ACE VET to industry. Employers generally perceive vocational education as a TAFE role, so the assistance of these associations could be valuable in alerting employers to the existence of ACE, its expanded focus, the vocational learning available and the ability of ACE to provide flexible, needs-based training.

> *Essentially all RTOs … talk to us about [our association] promoting their services while we are out in the field … Under our contractual obligations we have a policy of user choice for the employer. So the employer chooses the RTO it wants to go through. If an ACE provider makes itself known, then, where appropriate, it can be listed with all the other RTOs for the employer to choose from.*
> (Employer association representative, NSW)

One interviewee noted that ACE colleges often belonged to their local business association. This would seem to be a worthwhile initiative if the assistance of such organisations is to be sought.

Although, strictly speaking, not employer associations, business enterprise centres (BECs) were also included in this category. BECs are organisations set up to foster the establishment and development of small businesses in the community, and as such, could be in a position to pass on information about ACE VET courses to businesses. Business management and the use of computer-based accounting programs would be obvious ACE VET offerings. However, any courses relevant to the sphere in which a particular business operates should be considered.

Employers

Surprisingly, direct approaches to employers were not regarded as a high priority option by most industry interviewees—despite the fact that evidence gathered from other sources indicated that substantial contact already occurred between ACE providers and local small businesses. This inconsistency in the findings might arise from the fact that many of the interviewees were representatives of industry organisations which customarily deal with large highly industrialised employers who normally view vocational education as the province of TAFE and other mainstream VET providers.

One employer association representative made an interesting observation that the majority of businesses do not have anyone responsible for training and other human resource needs.

> *You've got to draw a distinction when you talk about employers—between larger employers with human resource departments and smaller ones. South Australia is a small business State: about 80% of our members employ less than 20 employees, so by any definition, they are small business. There is probably another 15% (in rough terms) that employ between 20 and 100, and only about 5% of our members employ more than 100 employees. The relevance of this is that, certainly any organisation with less than 20 employees will not have a person skilled in HR, or personnel management, or training, or anything—it's all seat of your pants type stuff. SA is full of these companies … And often, I think, things related to vocational education and credit transfers and pathways and opportunities for employees and whatever, is driven by the HR manager or the HR department.* (Employer association representative, SA)

Combined with the other comments this suggests that if ACE wishes to make industry more aware of its vocational provision, it should keep in mind the need to target two types of businesses with two levels of communication. For the (generally) smaller businesses, contact needs to be aimed directly at employers and their employees who, in all probability, have very little knowledge of training matters and awareness of ACE. For larger businesses, the communication is likely to be with a designated human resources (HR) or personnel manager who often has training experience and qualifications and because of this, may even know something of ACE.

Unions

There were mixed feelings about the ability of unions to assist in promotion of ACE VET. Unions were commonly seen as being most likely to assist if the learning could be linked to union-related activities, such as workplace leadership, communication and negotiation rather than technically oriented aspects of the job.

> *ACE would get a good reception from the union—there'd be no barriers to it. At the moment we offer a whole range of training to members: communication skills, report writing, consultation,*

> *negotiation, shop stewardship, industrial relations, workcover, all of which are free to our members. One of the things we were going to trial was résumé writing, that's a skill people need to have these days, particularly nowadays with job changes and things.* (Union representative, SA)

Improving ACE staff knowledge of ACE VET and linkages with mainstream VET

If ACE staff are to assist students to benefit from ACE VET and its linkages with mainstream VET, they should be fully informed in this area. Providers were therefore asked to suggest ways in which ACE staff could be assisted to improve their knowledge of ACE VET, mainstream VET and credit transfer options. The suggestions they gave fell into three main categories: better quality information and better access to it; in-house (that is, ACE-based) training; and liaison and joint training with mainstream VET. The following is a summary of the suggestions received.

- Improved information and information access
  - Provide newsletters and printed information sheets (particularly to assist the large proportion of ACE staff who only work part-time and thus find it difficult to keep up with changes). Mail out information where necessary or use other means of distribution such as electronic media.
  - Develop a concise vocational course information manual—updated annually.
  - Develop information and support networks within ACE.
- ACE-based training
  - Encourage ACE staff to regularly update and improve their knowledge of mainstream VET provision—especially part-time staff.
  - Allocate time for professional development in regard to ACE VET, including in-house orientation for new ACE staff and information sessions for existing ACE staff. A requirement that ACE staff attend two or three update seminars each year was also suggested.
  - Hold regular local and regional ACE provider meetings or workshops covering updated information on availability of pathways, linkages, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and recognition of current competencies (RCC).
  - Provide training in RPL, RCC and credit transfer processes (so staff can assist ACE students to apply).
- Liaison and joint training
  - Hold joint professional development meetings and workshops on linkages between ACE and mainstream VET.
  - Improve liaison with mainstream VET personnel, including visits between sectors, co-operative and collaborative action on relevant tasks, and communication relating to course details and requirements.
  - Develop concise, reader friendly cross-sector newsletters specific to ACE–mainstream VET linkages.
  - Distribute relevant information about ACE provision to mainstream VET and relevant information about mainstream VET provision to ACE.

Improving mainstream VET staff knowledge of ACE VET and credit transfer

One of the concerns identified by participants in this study in relation to linkages between ACE study and mainstream VET was the perceived lack, on the part of mainstream VET staff, of knowledge of ACE VET and ways it could be linked to mainstream VET. Provision of information to mainstream VET staff was therefore seen to be an important issue.

In the questionnaire, providers were asked to suggest ways in which mainstream VET staff might be assisted to improve their knowledge of ACE VET. The following summarises their responses:

- The majority of suggestions received were intended to encourage greater interaction and communication between the two sectors. Specific ideas proposed included:
  - liaison between staffs
  - visits to each other's campuses
  - attending each other's classes and interacting with the students
  - collaboration on programs
  - cross-provider meetings of key staff
  - joint reciprocal professional development opportunities
  - meetings in informal settings
  - networking
  - facilitation of phone and email contact
  - establishment of more direct links between respective members of staff in the same field
  - identification of mainstream VET personnel to whom ACE information can be forwarded
- Better information provision was also frequently suggested by respondents:
  - periodic information updating seminars (perhaps two or three times per year)
  - short, informal and reader friendly cross-sectoral information newsletters
  - a Statewide general handbook on ACE vocational courses
  - more and improved ACE promotional materials
  - ensuring ACE personnel are familiar with relevant national module numbers
  - regular updating of course information manuals (at least yearly)
  - generally improved ACE marketing strategies
  - ACE presence in mainstream VET information centres at enrolment times to provide ACE-related information and assistance when needed
- General ideas and comments included:
  - in NSW, a need for better knowledge and application of the *NSW ACE–TAFE Joint Strategic Plan* at local levels
  - a need for designated contact persons in mainstream VET to whom ACE can send relevant information. 'As an ACE provider, it is hard to know the best person or department to send information to', said one respondent
  - a need for mainstream VET recognition of ACE as a quality provider of VET
  - a need for more openness between the ACE and mainstream VET sectors—so ACE is not seen as a threat

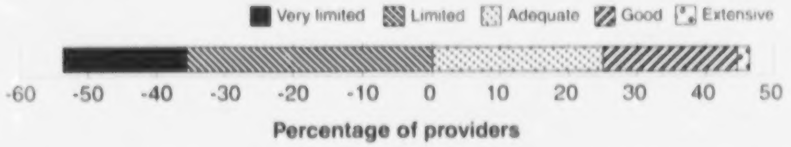
ACE–mainstream VET interaction and linkages

Linkages

Availability of pathways and credit transfer

Credit transfer enables students who have completed ACE VET to have their learning credited as part of mainstream VET study. Providers were asked to rate the availability of credit transfer from ACE VET to mainstream VET. In their responses (in figure 17), just over half (54%) saw such availability as either *Limited* or *Very limited* and only a minority (21%) rated availability as *Good* or *Extensive*, at the other end of the scale. Although there were no significant rating differences between NSW and SA, analysis across respondent role categories showed that managers tended to see provision as more limited than co-ordinators who, in turn, saw it as more limited than trainers.

Figure 17: Availability of ACE–mainstream VET pathways and credit transfer: Provider opinions



Pathways and linkages may be presented by ACE as an option available to students who complete a particular course. In this way they can be important to the marketing of a course. The following comment from an ACE principal illustrates the importance of pathways and linkages to the ACE sector and highlights the need for more to be done to develop them.

> *Pathways are very important to us. We see it as a marketing tool so that, when we are publicising courses, we can actually demonstrate the pathways that are connected to them. From my perspective, I need other people like private colleges, and TAFE in particular, to become serious about linking in with us and assisting that pathway process. Even though the strategic plan in NSW obviously calls for those sorts of co-operations and linkages, the reality on the ground is different because we are not funded to think about it. I believe that unless we start to look at what the pathways and linkages are, we will start to lose our market bases.* (ACE principal, NSW)

Providers were also asked to indicate whether there were any difficulties encountered in arranging credit transfer from ACE to mainstream VET. Just over half indicated there were at least some difficulties (30% indicating they encountered *some* difficulties and 24% indicating *many*). The remaining 46% indicated they were *not aware of any*.

When asked to specify the most serious difficulties encountered, two main categories could be identified:

- apparent reluctance of mainstream VET to:
    - participate in credit transfer processes
    - recognise ACE course credentials (even when ACE was offering essentially the same course, one commentator added)
    - recognise ACE as an RTO

- demands on time and funds brought about by the need to:
  - set up consultations
  - repeatedly justify the same ACE course outcome to mainstream VET providers with whom credit transfer was being pursued
  - unnecessarily engage in RPL as part of the linkage process
  - engage in excessive paperwork

The following comment from an ACE administrator illustrates how costs can inhibit linkage development by ACE providers:

> *[Providers] are often resource strapped—they need disposable income to put somebody on board in order to [develop pathways and credit transfer] at a local level, so it tends to be done by the directorate in lieu of the providers.* (ACE administration representative, NSW)

BACE in NSW, recognising this problem, works at policy level endeavouring to formalise State-wide arrangements for pathways and credit transfer with TAFE. A series of *ACE–TAFE Joint Strategic Plans* developed in partnership with the NSW TAFE Commission and first implemented in 1993 has provided a policy framework for this.

At a local level, some ACE co-ordinators have qualified as workplace trainers and assessors so they can undertake their own RPL assessments and work from a sound basis on credit transfer issues.

Other issues identified included:

- the need to produce extensive evidence for RPL
- a lack of awareness, both in ACE and mainstream VET, of the other sector's programs
- a tendency of mainstream VET to award credit for ACE learning on the basis of module length (that is, time required to complete a module) rather than on module content

> *Credit transfer into TAFE has been extremely difficult because … the sort of comparisons they [TAFE] do are based on the length of the module … if an ACE module is not as long as a TAFE module, they make an assumption that it only equates to part of the TAFE module. We have had to have some pretty heavy negotiations with them over some areas and feel that some of the ACE courses have been short-changed.* (ACE administration representative, NSW)

- a tendency of mainstream VET to award credit on the basis of certification rather than on completed competencies (due, it was said, to slow uptake of training packages in some areas of mainstream VET)

> *With training packages we would be wanting to negotiate credit transfer on the basis of competencies—because we have a lot of providers who are delivering short courses for specific competencies. This is going to be difficult because, in NSW at least, TAFE is still [largely] module-based … [and is] mapping the packages onto their modules. This does not facilitate credit transfer. We are about to go into a new round of credit transfer negotiations with TAFE. The framework will have to be different from that which we had before where we were looking at matches between accredited courses.* (ACE administration representative, NSW)

> *The fact about competence is, it doesn't matter how you get there as long as you are competent. A lot of people miss that point, they think you must do an accredited course or a VET course to become competent. TAFE misses the point enormously when we are doing RPL or RCC—they are looking for qualifications rather than competence.* (ACE principal, NSW)

- a lack of consistency in credit decisions:

> *Some students who did certificate II in a particular course would go to the local TAFE offering the diploma and would come back saying no recognition was given for the modules they had done. It seemed it depended on the TAFE person they dealt with; for example, two students did the same course at our [ACE] college, one was given credit, the other wasn't.* (ACE principal, NSW)

If links between ACE VET and mainstream VET are to be strengthened and better utilised it is important that the issues described above be addressed.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) and recognition of current competency (RCC)

When providers were asked if RPL (and RCC) played a role in linking ACE vocational study to mainstream VET, almost all (97%) said it did. Some of their accompanying comments have been paraphrased below.

- Credit transfer is difficult to achieve between ACE and mainstream VET. RPL can help overcome this difficulty.
- RPL provides a pathway from non-accredited courses to accredited courses.
- It is difficult for individual students to prepare their RPL case.

The comments suggest that RPL or RCC is commonly used to link ACE to mainstream VET, often because pathways have not been established and credit transfer is not available. The third comment suggests that, even in relation to RPL or RCC, students may benefit if they can be guided through the process. ACE should seek to help students by providing such guidance.

Established or pre-determined pathways between ACE and mainstream VET

To determine ACE provider awareness of pathways, providers were asked if they were aware of any established pathways between ACE and mainstream VET. Just over half (54%) said they were. When asked if they were aware of pathways set up for special needs groups such as Aboriginal, non-English-speaking background or women in non-traditional occupations, few knew of any.

Providers were also asked how pathways were set up. Most commonly this was through meetings and other interactions between ACE and mainstream VET staff. For some this was at local institutional level, for others at peak body level (such as, in NSW, between BACE and TAFE NSW).

All of the providers who responded indicated there was a need for new pathways to be created and existing ones to be improved.

Credit transfer for stream 1000 courses

It has been suggested that credit transfer arrangements for vocationally oriented stream 1000 courses offered by ACE should be investigated and developed. Even small amounts of credit gained this way would enable students to have relevant stream 1000 outcomes contribute towards mainstream VET study. More importantly, for some people it could be the catalyst that induces them to pursue VET study.

Almost all (95%) of providers thought credit transfer arrangements for stream 1000 courses with potential vocational application should be investigated. However, it was also pointed out that the vocational relevance of stream 1000 courses would normally be fairly limited (because if a stream 1000 course had too strong a vocational intent it would be reclassified into a higher stream).

Interaction between ACE and mainstream VET

Sharing of resources, including ACE access to VET clearing houses

It was suggested in the reviewed literature that VET clearing houses should be established through which all providers, including ACE vocational providers, could view, assess, purchase or otherwise access training products (including Crown copyright and accredited curriculum documents), or could themselves license and offer products they have produced. Almost all providers (92%) saw this idea as feasible.

Additional comments of interest were:

- ACE regional councils or the Adult Learning Australia (ALA) could play a part.
- The clearing house could be computer-based (for example, a website on the Internet).
- There could be a biannual catalogue of products.

Co-ordination of ACE VET with mainstream VET

When providers were asked to rate how well ACE VET was co-ordinated with mainstream VET in their State, just over half (54%) rated it as *Adequate* or better. A comparison across States was not undertaken because the number of responses was small. The fact that nearly half of the respondents rated co-ordination as less than *Adequate* (that is, *Poor* or *Very poor*) gave cause for concern.

Should ACE be complementary or competitive?

Complement or compete? — survey questionnaire results

In the past, ACE VET has been largely complementary to mainstream VET, providing courses which tie in with mainstream VET offerings rather than duplicate them. With increasing emphasis on vocational learning, some ACE providers are now RTOs, offering accredited courses which are essentially the same as those offered by mainstream VET. In this respect, they are moving from a complementary role to a more competitive one. Providers and students were asked to indicate how complementary or competitive ACE should be in relation to mainstream VET. Almost three-quarters of providers (72%) and more than three-quarters of students (82%) thought ACE should be complementary.

The additional comments offered by providers also generally favoured a complementary role. Their comments commonly referred to waste of ACE funds, staff, facilities and other resources in order to compete. One provider made the interesting suggestion that 'TAFE should also be complementary to ACE', implying that TAFE, too, ought not stray too far from its traditional areas of learning provision.

While 82% of students indicated ACE should remain complementary, the relatively few comments they added were less favourable to a complementary role than were those of the providers. One of the few students commenting in favour of a complementary role said: 'Direct competition will probably reduce funding [leading to] centres being closed or merged and reduced [student] access'.

Comments from students in favour of increased competition were mostly based on the premise that competition provided greater choice for the student. However, it was also pointed out that, in small communities especially, competition leading to duplication of learning provision meant that resources which might be used to provide other needed programs would be lost. So in that sense, the variety of programs available to the community, and hence choice, would be reduced. Other comments in favour of increased competition were that: 'ACE may be able to offer courses which are more suitable for some people than the equivalent ones from TAFE', and the suggestion that competition would 'push up the standards of teachers and course content'.

Complement or compete? — interview comments

The following comments extracted from interviews give insight into how personnel working in the ACE sector, representatives of industry, and others who have an interest in vocational learning perceived the issue of whether ACE should compete with, or complements, mainstream VET in relation to vocational learning provision.

Mainstream VET sees ACE competing for students

Some commentators suggested that ACE is perceived by mainstream VET as a competitor rather than an ally. The following comments from two ACE managers illustrate this view:

> *... there's a slight problem here in that TAFE is pretty anti-ACE because they see us as competition rather than as part of the chain. They would be reluctant [to co-operate] and would frown pretty strongly on us if we started to deliver the same modules as they do, which could potentially give students credit. What we've chosen to do is to target our courses at a Certificate II level whereas our [local] TAFE is at Certificate III. So ... no direct credit transfers [are possible]. We've really done this to appease TAFE because it sees any student that comes to ACE as one student less for them. I actually believe the opposite is the case—by coming to ACE it opens up opportunities for the students so that more go on to TAFE.* (ACE manager, NSW)

> *TAFE very much considers that we are a threat. Not so much in the city itself, but in the smaller communities where there are not many students to go round. If we get some money and are able to get a group going they see it as them* not *getting a group going because we have done so—rather than as us having identified a need and pursued it. There is that element, a lot of resistance, a lot of anger—that makes it hard. I've spoken to the institute director here and he doesn't want that to happen but [in effect] says that we are affecting the personal incomes [of their personnel].*
> (ACE Manager, NSW)

The first comment is of interest for several reasons. It illustrates the concern this issue can cause and the lengths to which some providers will go to avoid confrontation, and it raises the point that, by starting with ACE, many students who lack the confidence to embark on a course with TAFE prepare themselves to move on to TAFE. Without ACE, TAFE would not see them.

ACE sees mainstream VET as moving into competition

Some ACE commentators also saw mainstream VET moving into what was perceived to be the province of ACE. Increased competition between the two sectors, therefore, could be the result of shifts in focus in both educational sectors. One provider saw the move of mainstream VET towards ACE-style provision as having an impact on ACE's long-term survival.

> *TAFE has tended to enrol students in full courses, whereas for ACE the tendency has always been towards enrolment in components of courses [individual modules]. More recently, however, in accordance with the training package concept, industry has shown increased preference for components of courses, so there has been a growing market for this type of training. Recognising this, TAFE is moving towards provision of components and so moving into competition with ACE.*
> (ACE manager, NSW)

> *TAFE is emulating the ACE model of flexibility, customer orientation, snappy courses, on time, on the client's premises, at a time the clients want it, with their TAFE Plus courses.*
> (ACE principal, NSW)

> *... in recent years ... TAFE [has set] up a commercial arm, TAFE Plus, which goes out to businesses and sets up units, modules and 'short courses', which are not accredited and do not provide a certificate. They are offered as fee-for-service. The courses are staffed by people from industry and casual staff, almost duplicating what ACE would call core business. There has been enormous growth in this area in TAFE—they see it as a money earner and there is pressure on them to become more entrepreneurial. TAFE business services has been formed which has completely separate enrolment systems with hot-lines and they advertise separately and now more frequently, the way ACE does. TAFE NSW, instead of just producing a handbook twice a year, now also advertises in the paper very heavily on a monthly basis, runs short courses and has continuous enrolments—all the sorts of flexible things that ACE was doing. ACE sees that as fairly aggressive competition.* (ACE association representative, NSW)

> *I think there is still a feeling in most of the [TAFE] institutes that they want to keep ACE and the [TAFE] vocational programs separate—certainly in the marketing of them. In this institute* there*

> *is probably almost an air of competition in that TAFE vocational programs are getting further and further into fee for service and this trend is going to happen more as they have to earn more of their own money. Looking at the programs we [ACE] do which are fairly heavily vocationally oriented and at the courses TAFE is picking up, which are similar to what we do, it is probable that, in the long term ACE will find it fairly difficult to survive.* (ACE education officer, SA)

(* This ACE provider operated from a TAFE institute campus.)

The general view: ACE should be complementary

Taken overall, comments from interviewees were in favour of ACE adopting a complementary rather than competitive role. However, there were differing views on what constituted complementarity. The different views expressed have been summarised under four headings:

Courses not offered by mainstream VET—niche markets

Some respondents believed that ACE should offer courses which were different from, or not normally offered by, mainstream VET. These included non-traditional subjects, basic or core subjects, and subject areas which some saw mainstream VET to be moving away from such as level I and II vocational subjects. In a sense, these could be represented as niche markets for ACE.

Same course content but different delivery

Others thought ACE could complement mainstream VET by offering the same course content, but in a different delivery mode. As one ACE principal put it: 'Our role should be offering what otherwise would not be available—because of lack of venue, wrong time or wrong type of delivery'.

Regional vocational provision

Regional vocational provision was an area in which some respondents saw strong potential for ACE to complement mainstream VET. This could take the form of ACE acting in partnership with mainstream VET to provide local tutoring, mentoring or supervision for students undertaking mainstream VET courses, or ACE providing equivalent courses for students in areas not served by mainstream VET.

ACE as a provider of workplace training

Another area seen by respondents as an area in which ACE could complement mainstream VET was in the provision of training in the workplace. Some ITAB representatives pointed out that the demand for training in the workplace, which is increasing with the advent of training packages, was not always being fully met by mainstream VET and that ACE with its flexibility and local presence might help fill the gap. As one ITAB representative pointed out, 'Employers are manufacturers not trainers, so they are looking to set up partnerships with trainers in their enterprises to provide training. Employers have the skilled people who can act as mentors while the registered training organisation provides all the generic training and backs them up with assessment and so forth'.

Outcomes if ACE becomes more competitive with mainstream VET

Some commentators warn that, if ACE providers do extend their curriculums to include the equivalent of mainstream VET programs (such as TAFE courses), thereby becoming competitive with mainstream VET, there could be undesirable outcomes for ACE. In order to quantify the perception of risks associated with ACE becoming more competitive, providers were asked to indicate on a five-point scale the likelihood of seven nominated outcomes should it do so. The seven outcomes, expressed in full, were:

- reduced co-operation or collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET providers

- unnecessary duplication of course provision
- loss of traditional ACE management freedom due to increased dependence on government funding
- reduction in the appeal of ACE to learners initially averse to formal study, due to ACE resembling mainstream VET
- shift of ACE vocational education focus from the needs of learners to the needs of industry
- reduction in existing low level ACE vocational education provision
- reduction in traditional ACE flexibility in order to conform to mainstream requirements

Response choices ranged from *Extremely likely* to *Not at all likely*. The results are shown for the two States separately in figures 18 and 19.

Figure 18: Outcomes from increased ACE competition with mainstream VET: NSW (n=42)

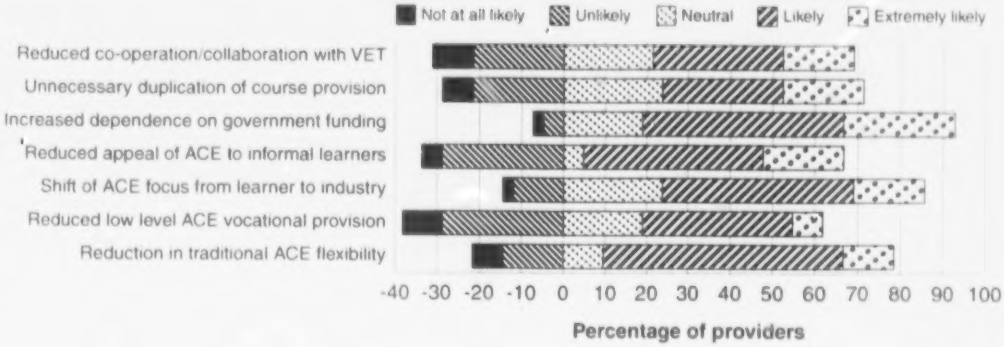
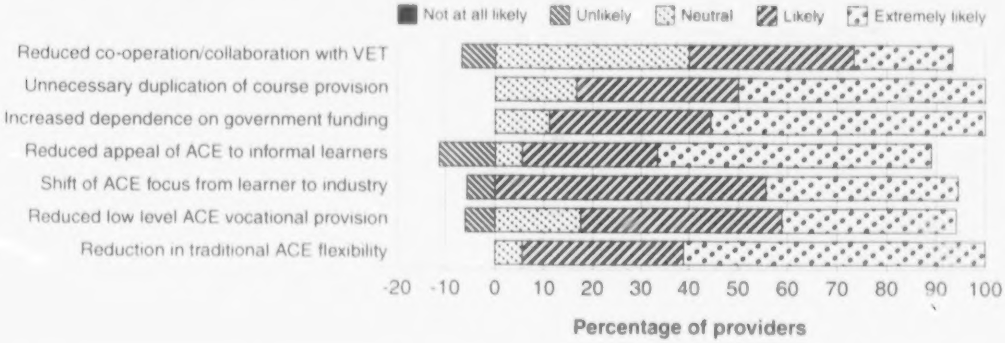


Figure 19: Outcomes from increased ACE competition with mainstream VET: SA (n=18)



The results indicated that providers generally saw all of the specified outcomes as likely to occur—SA more so than NSW. For SA, responses of *Extremely likely* or *Likely* represented 83% of the total number of responses for the seven items compared with a corresponding figure of 58% for NSW.

Combining the results for both States showed that for the two most likely outcomes, *Loss of traditional ACE management freedom due to increased dependence on government funding* (79% of respondents choosing *Extremely likely* or *Likely*) and *Reduction in traditional ACE flexibility in order to conform to mainstream requirements* (78%), there are common elements of loss of freedom or flexibility—qualities cherished both by ACE providers and their students. The risk of losing these qualities probably contributes to the opposition to ACE becoming competitive with mainstream VET reported above.

One commentator made an interesting personal observation that ACE participation in VET may lead to reduced TAFE involvement in provision of industry training packages.

> *I don't know what my board's feelings are about ACE being involved in vocational education. Personally, I have got reservations. In NSW, TAFE is [saying that it] has a role for the general community, not just industry, and needs to provide courses in language, literacy and numeracy, and for the unemployed. My fear is that if ACE gets too involved in industry it aids TAFE's argument that it can do less in industry. I've already been to meetings where TAFE has said it thinks it should pull out of industry training package stuff because ACE is not just providing adult and community education any more.* (ITAB executive representative, NSW)

Co-operation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET

If ACE and mainstream VET are to work effectively together there will need to be co-operation and collaboration between the two sectors. This will especially be the case if the two sectors are to complement each other.

In their questionnaire, providers were asked if there was a need for greater co-operation and collaboration as a means of facilitating joint ACE–mainstream VET activities, such as strategic alliances, sharing and allocation of course provision responsibilities, joint provision of courses, and shared use of resources such as premises, teachers and equipment. Almost three-quarters (72%) of the providers who responded to the question, saw a need for greater co-operation and collaboration.

When students were asked if, in their experience, they saw a need for greater co-operation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET, almost the same proportion of respondents (74%) said there was.

Providers were also asked to rate the existing extent of collaboration and co-operation between ACE and mainstream VET. Nearly three-quarters (70%) felt it was less than adequate. In the eyes of ACE providers, it seems, much remains to be done towards achieving satisfactory levels of co-operation and collaboration between the two sectors.

It is generally agreed that ACE, because of the nature of its learning provision, is a significant initiator of 'lifelong learning' in the community—ACE starts many people on this path. Based on this premise, providers were asked as a follow-up question whether they thought greater collaboration and co-operation between ACE and mainstream VET could contribute to incorporation of the principles of lifelong learning and learner-centred adult education into mainstream VET. More than three-quarters (77%) felt that this could occur.

It was also conjectured there might be a reciprocal gain—perhaps, through greater co-operation and collaboration, ACE could derive benefit in the form of improvement to its teaching of vocational principles and practices. When providers were asked if this were likely, 88% felt that it was.

Finally, providers were invited to state what they thought were the most important actions that could be taken to achieve greater co-operation and collaboration. Of the 24 who responded, 17 provided relevant suggestions. These are summarised below:

- ten referred to a need for better communication
- four focussed on attitudinal change, referring to a need for inter-sectoral team-building skills to establish greater trust and remove fear of threat from the other sector; a need to work together and foster mutual respect; and a need for open mindedness
- two focussed on the need to share resources
- one proposed that there should be more co-ordination 'at the top'

Comments from interviews about co-operation and collaboration

The issues surrounding co-operation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET were frequently highlighted by providers, administrators and industry representatives in their interviews. Typical comments covering a wide range of issues relating to ACE–mainstream VET interaction are reproduced below. A large number of comments has been presented to provide a comprehensive picture of respondents' views on these important issues.

In reading the comments it should be noted that the majority of ACE providers consulted in this research were located in metropolitan areas. Because these providers operate in a more competitive environment than those in regional areas, it is likely that the overall levels of co-operation and collaboration between the two sectors may be better than the comments generally imply.

Finally, it must be pointed out that while the comments respondents gave were often quite frank and sometimes critical of some aspects of ACE–mainstream VET interaction, it would be unfair to allow the criticisms to imply that there was any general antagonism between the two. In interviews, the critical comments were invariably only a small proportion of the views aired and it was clear they were almost always delivered in the hope that a particular issue could be resolved leading to better ACE–mainstream VET interaction.

Some examples of co-operative and collaborative relationships

ACE respondents quoted many instances of co-operative and collaborative relationships with mainstream VET. The following are examples:

> *We have a very good relationship with TAFE. For example, they seek brochures from us to distribute to interested people, we use the local TAFE college library facilities, [a scheme] specially arranged by the TAFE principal, and I have acted on interview panels for selection of TAFE staff.*
>
> (ACE principal, NSW)

> *I have heard of examples in metropolitan Sydney where ACE principals have been having regular dialogue with TAFE institutes talking about the directions of the institute and the possibility of ACE being a part of that and even being on the institute board.*
>
> (ACE association representative, NSW)

> *Students are apprehensive about going to a TAFE institution. The leader of [the ACE] group is organising for TAFE lecturers to come down to the centre and present some of the introductory TAFE lessons at the centre so that students and volunteer tutors don't feel so intimidated.*
>
> (ACE manager, SA)

Another ACE manager described how their tutors had familiarised themselves with mainstream VET course information and pathways so that they could conduct sessions for their completing ACE students on options for future study beyond ACE.

Greater incentive to co-operate and complement in regional areas

It was apparent from some comments that co-operative relationships between ACE and mainstream VET were often stronger in regional areas where both ACE and the mainstream VET providers are located in a close-knit community. As the following comment illustrates, this high degree of co-operation and complementary activity can evolve from a need for the organisations to remain viable by catering efficiently for a limited market. This particular comment is interesting in that it also highlights the parochial outlook of the local providers which stems from the need to protect their viability.

> *In some areas there might be some competition to TAFE but I think most of the competition comes from the large number of private (for profit) providers in the area who are offering accredited programs, a situation which has been developing over the past 5 or 6 years. I think that, certainly in the country areas, most ACE and TAFE institutions have got their act together to provide a*

> *network of pathways. So I would say that while there might be a couple of areas of competition, most of it would be co-operation. Because none of us has heaps of money, and because we've got private providers whipping in from Sydney, Melbourne and wherever to offer programs, it's in our interests to provide the best service to our community—so it's 'co-operate or die' I think.*
>
> *My view is that, if [students] are looking for a non-TAFE provider, I would rather they picked us, as an ACE provider … then at least it's being kept in the district and in the community.*
>
> (ACE manager, NSW)

Benefits of operating from an integrated ACE–mainstream VET campus

Several respondents from the ACE sector commented favourably on the benefits associated with operating from an integrated campus, particularly in regard to pathways between ACE and mainstream VET. The following account from an ACE provider located on the same campus as a TAFE institute provides a particularly interesting example:

> *The main linkage with mainstream VET is because ACE is in the same building as TAFE and there are direct pathways for students. We have a lot of lecturers who teach across both Business Studies and ACE and that works really well. [The] lecturers who teach across both areas try and teach in a way that gives students access to pathways.*
>
> *In some cases we teach the same modules but [without] assessment. The modules we are using, and have been using for a number of years with regular updating, are looked at by Business Studies and Computing studies and they sometimes end up using the same study guides as we do.*
>
> *In some cases we have had students in our programs who have been doing 'Ticket to training' [a government initiative where money is given to small businesses to enable them to increase their skills through further study]. Generally, these people go through [TAFE] vocational programs but we have a situation in this institute, and I think in other institutes, where the programs they are wanting to go into are really popular and there are insufficient places. So, in a situation where we run the same or a similar program, and the lecturer teaches across both programs, the students come into the ACE program and are assessed for the TAFE course. The course on MYOB is a good example of this.*
>
> *I think [our advertising] helps the rest of the [TAFE] institute, because we do a lot more advertising than the rest of the institute does and our brochures are circulated much more widely.*
>
> *We have a process where the [TAFE VET] programs have their home rooms and they have first priority. Then the other TAFE vocational programs have second priority, and ACE has third priority. Normally this is not a problem except when TAFE has a fee-for-service class they have to fit in somewhere. Our times generally work in well with the vocational ones—we always try to take the down-time. We also run a lot of classes on Saturday.* (ACE education officer, SA)

Co-operation and collaboration in language and literacy provision

Language and literacy have long been areas in which both ACE and mainstream VET have had an interest. In recent times there have been positive steps taken towards developing a more effective co-operative approach to provision of these programs.

> *There are a lot of good networking things in the literacy area—the associations between professionals working across providers [such as] the prison system, Adult Migrant Education Program and private organisations, and good field support from ACE to TAFE providers. Dialogue is going on. I even know of ANTA-type projects which are looking at language and literacy in training packages. And there are people from TAFE and the community services industries working together with specialist private providers and ACE on how they can integrate [language and literacy] into community services training packages. These are good models for how things should work together, but it has taken an enormous investment of money on everyone's part just to get to that point—I think other areas of ACE have got a long way to go.*
>
> (ACE association representative, NSW)

Referrals as a form of co-operation

There are several important reasons for referrals between ACE and mainstream VET:

- The particular course required may be unavailable from the provider initially approached.
- Places in a course are limited due to high demand and an equivalent or similar course may be available in the other sector.
- Equivalent or similar courses in the other sector may better suit a student's needs. For example, an ACE course may offer greater informality or more individual attention, or a mainstream VET course may be more structured or offer better access to technological equipment.

Co-operation, in the form of referrals between ACE and mainstream VET does occur, as the first comment below illustrates. However, not all respondents feel cross-sectoral referrals are working satisfactorily. The second comment highlights an instance of a need for referrals which was not being met.

> *Probably about one-third of our referrals to other courses are to the TAFE information services, another third go to WEA, and the remaining third to other ACE providers in the region. The local TAFE college is quite good at referring people to us—either because students can't be accommodated or because ACE supplies the particular program needed.* (ACE principal, NSW)

> *There needs to be an established process for people to be referred, but TAFE doesn't feel it can refer students directly or hasn't got the mechanism to do it. I know that in one of the [TAFE] colleges, 600 people were rejected last year from entering IT courses with nowhere else to go. Yet to try and get those 600 referred [to ACE] is almost impossible. We are trying to get some co-operation with TAFE—there are some individual TAFE principals who have approached us.*
>
> (ACE principal, NSW)

Co-operation and collaboration is dependent on personnel relationships

The degree of co-operation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET organisations can be significantly affected by relationships between the personnel involved and, as the first commentator below points out, by prior experiences with the other sector.

> *We don't hear too many good stories about co-operation with TAFE because they are seen as competitors rather than colleagues. What really happens is up to the individuals within the [ACE] colleges, and when these individuals change, all the goodwill and all the good work can fall down overnight. When I was running another ACE college we had a really good relationship with TAFE because [the TAFE director] had had a good experience somewhere else with ACE.*
>
> (ACE principal, NSW)

> *The local TAFE college is quite good at referring people to us—either because students can't be accommodated or because ACE supplies the particular program needed. However, sometimes it depends on who in TAFE is involved in the contact with the student.* (ACE principal, NSW)

Political, industrial, budgetary and bureaucratic influences on co-operation and collaboration

Co-operation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET can also be affected by political, industrial, budgetary and bureaucratic factors, as the following comments from ACE respondents illustrate.

> *I've discussed the need for pathways with two TAFE principals. They would like to do it, but it is subject to approval from their institutes—and it's going to bog down in the process.*
>
> (ACE principal, NSW)

> *What you will find, and it's fairly disappointing, is that our relationship with TAFE, the major formal provider in our region, is not good. I'm on the TAFE advisory council for the institute, but*

> *it doesn't make a lot of difference, there's a fair amount of hostility, and it's [due] to ACE providing competition for TAFE. And, with TAFE being restructured in NSW, teachers think we are taking their jobs, which in some ways we might be, but it's not something we chose to do. We are just responding to government which said we want more opportunities and options for people—and that's all we're doing.* (ACE regional council officer, NSW)

> *If no funding is available to support development and maintenance of linkages, then TAFE colleges will not be willing to do anything towards them. Provision for time and personnel are necessary for this to happen.* (ACE education officer, SA)

ACE co-operation and collaboration need not be restricted to TAFE

Whilst the majority of comments regarding co-operation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET focussed on ACE–TAFE interaction, it can also extend to other mainstream VET providers. Indeed, as the following commentator points out, ACE and private mainstream VET providers have much in common regarding their styles of vocational provision.

> *Private providers have approached me saying they could see possibilities of working with ACE to help provide broader [vocational] coverage—in country towns for example. This is something both ACE and the private providers could be interested in if they could find the resources and time to develop the necessary partnerships. The ACE entrepreneurial style is much closer to that of private providers than it is to TAFE.* (ACE association representative, NSW)

ACE–TAFE Joint Strategic Plan

An initiative designed to facilitate greater co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration across the ACE–TAFE interface in NSW is the *ACE–TAFE Joint Strategic Plan*. Initiated in 1993, and revised several times since, it is a joint endeavour of the NSW Board of Adult and Community Education and the Board of the NSW TAFE Commission. While not all participants in this study saw it as being completely successful, most viewed it positively and regarded it as a significant step in the development of effective linkages between ACE and mainstream VET. Certainly, many of the suggestions and ideas proposed by respondents in this report accord with the objectives and strategies contained in the plan—an indication that the plan has accurately identified issues to be addressed.

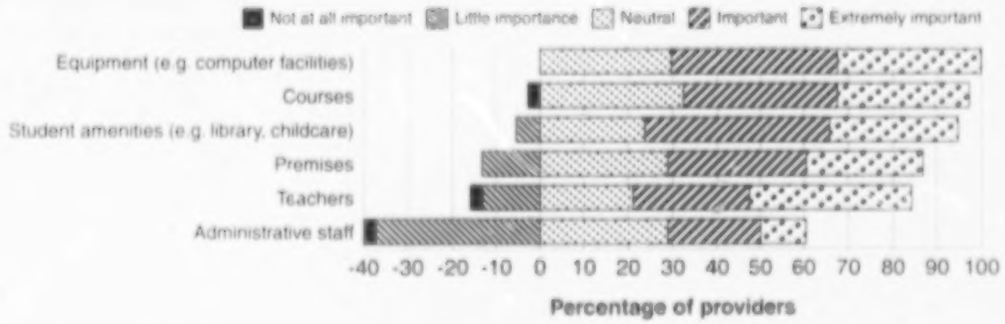
Sharing of resources with mainstream VET

As reported earlier, almost three-quarters of providers believed that more co-operation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET should take place. One way in which this might occur is through the sharing of resources such as equipment, premises and staff. Potential benefits of resource sharing, both to ACE and mainstream VET, could include more effective utilisation of funds (through pooling) to provide a better range and quality of resources, and more efficient utilisation of the resources through less idle time.

Because the resources are shared in common with mainstream VET, an added benefit for ACE VET could be that ACE is more likely to be perceived as 'teaching to the same standards' as the mainstream. As a consequence, the outcomes may be more readily recognised by mainstream VET thereby enabling linkages between ACE and mainstream VET to be more easily achieved.

To explore the idea of sharing resources with mainstream VET, providers were asked to rate the importance of sharing each of six types of resources. The results are given in figure 20. There were no significant State differences in the ratings except for *Sharing of student amenities*, which NSW tended to see as being more important than SA.

Figure 20: Provider opinion of importance of ACE sharing specified resources with mainstream VET

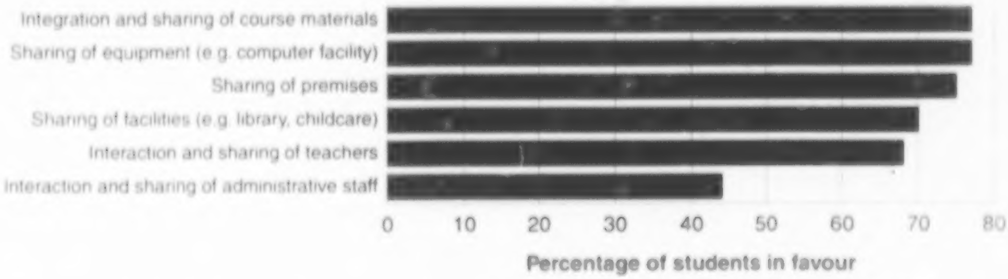


The high degree of importance attached to sharing equipment is understandable (although, as some comments showed, not everyone saw sharing of equipment as desirable). Mainstream VET has, through necessity, accumulated a huge amount of capital equipment for vocational teaching purposes. Much of this is very expensive to purchase and maintain and rapidly becomes obsolete. ACE will need access to up-to-date equipment if it is to move into highly technical areas of vocational provision; however, in the present circumstances it is not a financially viable option for ACE to purchase much of this equipment. The solution therefore must be either to share equipment with mainstream VET or gain access to it through industry (by teaching in the workplace, for example). Where ACE and TAFE providers share the same campus, sharing between ACE and mainstream VET is already occurring.

The low percentage in favour of sharing of administrative staff makes it the strong exception to the other choices. Examination of the results in detail showed that 39% rated sharing of administrative staff either as of *Little importance* or *Not at all important* and a further 29% were neutral on the issue. It seems ACE providers would prefer to use their own administrative staff.

To find out what students thought of sharing of resources they were also asked to identify from six listed areas where they thought there was scope for greater sharing between ACE and mainstream VET. Figure 21 shows the percentages of students responding to each choice. The results suggest that, like the providers, they were generally supportive of sharing in all areas listed except that of *Administrative staff*.

Figure 21: Students in favour of sharing resources with mainstream VET



In response to an invitation to nominate any other areas in which greater sharing should take place, students nominated: *Access to and sharing of information* (presumably implying interchange of information about programs and other matters of benefit to students) and *Sharing of advertising* (possibly with a view to accessing a wider audience and saving costs through greater efficiency).

Difficulties that could arise from sharing resources with mainstream VET

A number of providers, students and interviewees in their responses commented on problems that could arise in relation to ACE sharing vocational teaching resources with mainstream VET. Potential problems they raised included the following.

Insufficient resources for sharing

Some respondents saw problems arising from a lack of resources or high demand on resources.

> *The practicality of sharing resources is the sticking point. Part of the ACE–TAFE Joint Strategic Plan was sharing of resources, TAFE to ACE, especially. The reality is that the demand on TAFE resources is so high and TAFE structures and red tape are so involved that they prevent it from happening. And there may be other organisations willing to pay to use the facilities. However, there may be better opportunities for sharing in rural areas.* (ACE principal, NSW)

Responsibility for damage and maintenance of equipment

ACE providers were cautious about entering into sharing arrangements for equipment that carried a high risk of responsibility for damage and maintenance. This particularly applied to computer facilities.

Ownership of resource materials

Ownership of resources was another complicating issue with respect to sharing of resources. This was of special concern to ACE providers because it is not uncommon for resources used in ACE teaching to be developed and owned by the teachers. Any sharing of such resources therefore would be subject to agreement of the teacher.

> *One of the issues which is going to arise is ownership of the resource material. We are presently very much dependent on the initiative of our teachers who, basically, produce the goods. When they go, they take their materials with them. That undermines continuity. Inevitably, we will have to pay some fee to purchase the right to use certain materials so as to maintain continuity and use [common] materials.* (ACE principal, NSW)

Sharing could be one-sided

Some providers noted that any sharing of resources with mainstream VET, particularly TAFE would almost inevitably be one-sided. As one put it: 'The barrier to share often appears to be one-sided—TAFE has bricks mortar and libraries, ACE doesn't. [It is an] unequal partnership from the beginning—TAFE doesn't see that ACE has anything of value to share'.

Sharing could undermine ACE identity

Several students added cautionary comments to their questionnaires, saying that if sharing of resources is to occur, care should be taken to ensure that ACE retains its identity and does not get 'swallowed up by TAFE', as one put it. Another commented: 'Share too much and you lose the very thing that makes each [type of provider] unique ... which could end up being a tragedy for the students'.

Improving ACE–mainstream VET interaction and linkages

The providers had most to say about changes for improvement in the area of interactions and linkages between ACE and mainstream VET. A wide range of issues was raised, including a need for better communication and greater trust between ACE and mainstream VET; a need for pathways and credit transfer options to be identified and information made available to students and industry; a suggestion that contact people to assist with linkage matters be identified in each sector; and a need for the establishment of additional pathways and linkages. These and other issues are reported in more detail below.

Priorities for development of linkages

In order to evaluate the relative importance of strategies for developing linkages between ACE and mainstream VET, providers were asked to rank each of 17 listed strategies as *High, Medium* or *Low* in priority for action. They were also invited to suggest other strategies not included in the list. Figure 22 is a summary of their responses compared by State. The order in which the strategies are listed in figure 22 reflects the overall priorities based on the combined ratings for the two States.

Inspection of figure 22 shows that the strategy most highly favoured for action, with 86% of all respondents to the question rating it *high priority*, was:

- establishment of learning pathways by negotiation of credit transfer, articulation and RPL

Other strategies also highly ranked (each being rated *high priority* by around 60% of respondents) were:

- information-sharing between ACE and mainstream VET
- development of a clearly identifiable national ACE VET structure
- identification and co-ordination of current ACE VET at local, regional and State levels
- cross-representation on ACE and VET management bodies
- demonstration of ACE's contribution to VET through relevant data collection

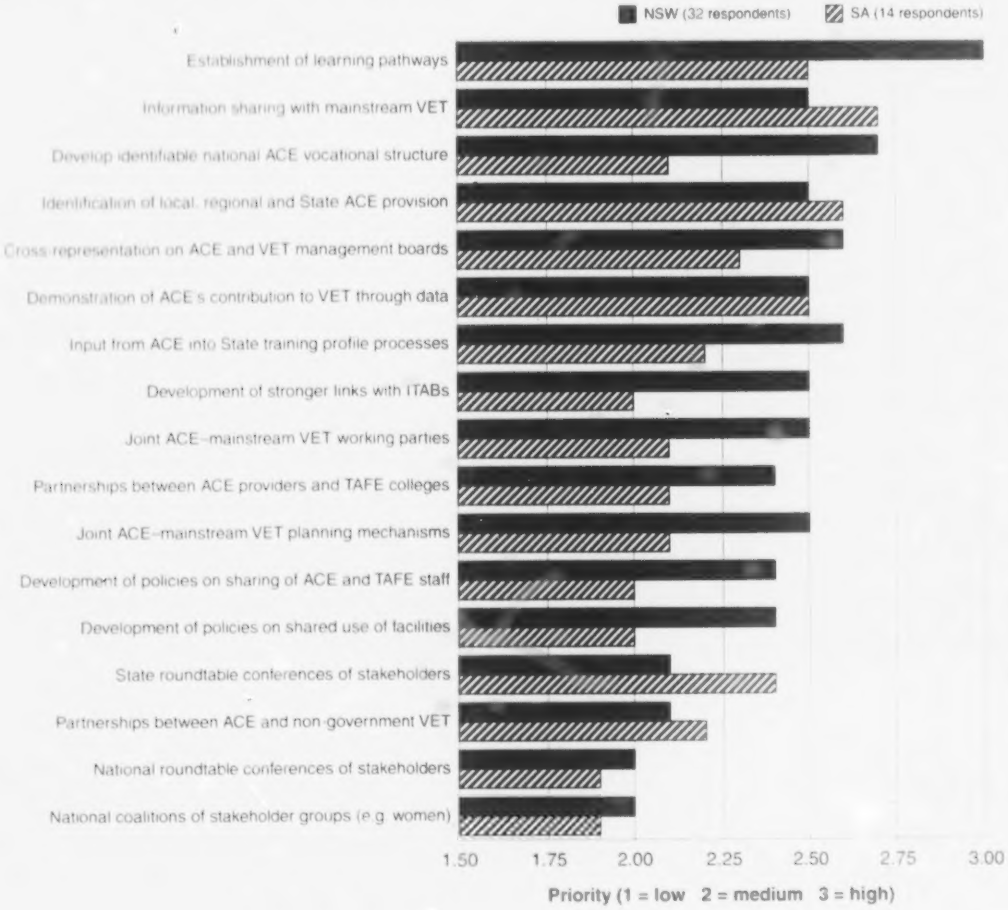
At the other end of the scale, providers were less in favour of:

- national coalitions of various stakeholder groups
- national roundtable conferences of stakeholders
- State roundtable conferences of stakeholders
- partnerships between ACE and non-government VET providers
- development of policies on sharing of ACE and TAFE staff
- development of policies on shared use of facilities

The response patterns suggested that NSW providers generally have greater interest in developing linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET than do SA providers. Strategies for which this trend was especially evident were:

- development of a clearly identifiable national ACE VET structure
- development of stronger links with ITABs
- establishment of learning pathways by negotiation of credit transfer, articulation and RPL

Figure 22: Provider ratings of strategies for development of linkages with mainstream VET



Comparisons of results by respondent role (managers versus co-ordinators/teachers) showed only minor differences for most strategies. The most prominent differences were for:

- cross-representation on ACE and VET management bodies
- national roundtable conferences of stakeholders

Both of these were more highly favoured by co-ordinators and teachers than managers.

Improving linkage co-ordination and information exchange with mainstream VET

Among the comments received from ACE and industry personnel were a number of suggested strategies for improving co-ordination of ACE–mainstream VET linkages and provision of linkage-related information. The following is a compilation of the most relevant suggestions.

- Employ personnel to co-ordinate ACE and mainstream VET program provision and facilitate development of linkages.
- Provide funding and other assistance to ACE providers to enable better mapping of ACE vocational courses, including non-accredited courses, against training packages and mainstream VET.

- Provide a register of all ACE centres which offer vocational courses and a regularly updated list of the courses available.
- Provide linkage information newsletters through ACE and mainstream VET peak bodies.
- Conduct joint ACE–mainstream VET workshops on linkages.
- Provide greater support for regional co-ordinators involved in establishing and facilitating linkages.

Assisting students to use linkages

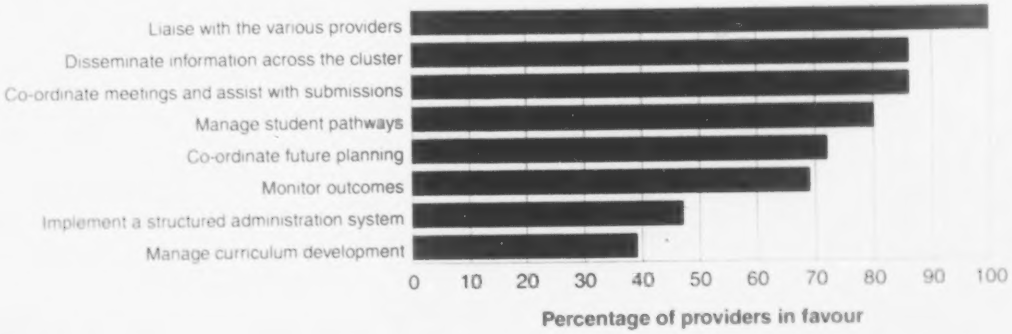
If faced with complicated procedures and a bewildering range of options regarding linking ACE course outcomes to mainstream VET study, students may not always make the best decision, or may give up altogether. When providers were asked to suggest ways in which students could be assisted to link their ACE course outcomes to mainstream VET study their suggestions included the following:

- Provide regularly updated information on linkages to staff and students.
- Develop simple guidelines to students and staff on options available and processes to be followed (rather than 'hours of reading', as one provider put it).
- Develop better communication between ACE and mainstream VET course co-ordinators on matters pertaining to linkages (including designation of linkage contact persons).
- Provide information and other assistance to relevant mainstream VET staff to enable them to inform enquirers at mainstream VET institutions of the options available regarding linked study.

Co-ordinators acting between ACE and mainstream VET

In the literature, the concept of co-ordinators working with clusters of ACE and mainstream VET providers to co-ordinate activity across the interface between the two sectors was sometimes raised. When providers were asked their opinion of the idea, more than three-quarters (82%) thought it a viable proposition. When asked to indicate in which of eight listed areas the duties of co-ordinators should fall, the providers responded as depicted in figure 23. Percentages shown are the proportions of providers selecting each area.

Figure 23: Provider preferences for duties of an ACE–mainstream VET co-ordinator



Analysis of figure 23 shows ACE providers would prefer to see ACE–mainstream VET co-ordinators working across a cluster of providers to liaise with providers, disseminate information across the cluster, co-ordinate meetings, and prepare or assist providers with submissions.

Some NSW respondents indicated that ACE regional co-ordinators and ACE regional council officers were already performing a number of these functions.

> *There are already co-ordinators [in the system]. BACE has personnel acting as co-ordinators, a lot of regional councils have VET officers and big ACE colleges have VET managers, part of whose duties would be to liaise with other VET providers.* (ACE principal, NSW)

In their accompanying comments respondents highlighted two important aspects of the role an ACE–mainstream VET co-ordinator might play:

- With suitable training and appropriate personal attributes, a co-ordinator may be better able to communicate and establish rapport across sectors, particularly, for example, where there was a risk that personality or philosophical differences between sector personnel could inhibit effective communication.
- A co-ordinator could help provide continuity in relationships between ACE and mainstream VET providers when there were changes in key ACE or mainstream VET personnel.

As an alternative to an individual person acting as a co-ordinator, it was suggested that the co-ordinating role could be undertaken on behalf of other providers by a 'lead provider' in a particular region.

A variation on the two concepts outlined above was the idea of providers or individuals specialising in a particular vocational area acting as regional or State co-ordinators in their specialty area.

Only one potentially negative issue was raised in connection with the role of an ACE–mainstream VET co-ordinator: it was suggested that if the co-ordinator were based with a particular provider, loyalty to the provider might create difficulties through conflict of interest.

Incentives for collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET

To encourage greater co-operation and collaboration and the fostering of linkages between ACE and mainstream VET, it has been suggested that incentives might be employed. When providers were asked to nominate possible incentives their responses could be summarised as follows:

- more equitable funding between ACE and mainstream VET (the inference being that ACE with its lesser funding lacked status and the ability to interact effectively with mainstream VET)
- provision of funding designated specifically for collaboration and co-operation on linkages
- provision of joint-venture funding to enable ACE and mainstream VET to work together towards common educational goals
- promulgation of evidence of better outcomes for students achieved as a result of collaboration and co-operation (for example, publishing of linkage case studies)
- highlighting the likelihood of an enhanced public profile achievable as a result of collaboration and co-operation
- emphasising the likelihood of a gain in ACE vocational credibility both with industry and the general public

ACE as a regional training broker or co-ordinator

Provision of vocational training to individuals and groups in outlying areas can be difficult if there is no suitable mainstream vocational provider in the area. In many such areas, there may be an ACE provider. While the ACE provider may not have the expertise or resources to actually teach the technical knowledge and skills, it may have the educational, organisational and entrepreneurial expertise to manage and co-ordinate learning in the workplace and the community. As the following comment implies, ACE, through co-operative arrangements, might well be able to assist mainstream VET providers, who do not have a venue in a particular area, to provide vocational training to local students.

> *ACE could have a role to play in managing, on behalf of regional communities, regionally based training programs that are auspiced or oversighted by a TAFE college. ACE could act as a broker or network agent. ACE should certainly establish relationships with local TAFE colleges or providers. I think the main thing is to keep it local and in a community context.*
>
> (ITAB executive representative, SA)

Strategies for sharing resources and funding with mainstream VET

It was suggested in the literature that sharing of resources and associated funding (including teachers, premises and equipment) between mainstream VET and ACE might assist ACE to provide vocational education to the standard required for satisfactory linking with training in the mainstream VET sector. Providers were asked to suggest ways in which sharing of resources or funding in this context could be facilitated. Their most noteworthy suggestions were:

- development of combined management committees (presumably with a brief to develop policies and procedures for sharing)
- appointment of regional co-ordinators to facilitate sharing
- establishment of a national register of accredited training personnel
- sharing which focussed on intellectual capital and ideas, professional development and student libraries rather than on teaching venues and equipment

School–ACE–VET linkages

In interviews, some commentators identified interesting possibilities concerning the role of ACE in relation to secondary schools, vocational training and industry:

- An ACE principal suggested that where an ACE provider already had working relationships with workplaces and industry, this, plus its close affinity with the community, placed it in a strong position to act as a training provider across schools and industry.
- An ITAB representative saw regional ACE providers as having the potential to be important providers of vocational training to school students in country areas where ACE was quite often the only provider of vocational training in the area.
- A union representative saw ACE's role in relation to schools in a much broader context, that of helping students destined never to have full-time work to develop a productive role and achieve fulfilment in modern society.

Conclusions

ACE personnel, ACE students and industry representatives who took part in this study drew attention to a wide range of issues concerning ACE VET and its relationship to mainstream VET. They praised areas which were working well, they criticised others which were not, and, more often than not, offered ideas and suggestions for improvement. The following conclusions have been drawn from the responses and comments of participants in this study.

The nature of ACE

Taken overall, the results of this study suggest that ACE in NSW is more strongly vocationally oriented than in SA. In SA, ACE consists predominantly of small 'neighbourhood houses', while in NSW, many ACE providers are comparatively large 'colleges' which offer higher proportions of what are clearly vocational courses. The nearest equivalent to these ACE colleges in SA appeared to be TAFE-based ACE providers operating from TAFE institutes.

Recognition of ACE VET

A topic that arose quite frequently in interviews with ACE providers and representatives from industry related to what constituted a 'vocational' course. Information from interviewees indicated that many students who undertook courses commonly labelled as *general interest*, *leisure*, *enrichment* or *personal development* realised upon completion of their course that they could apply the knowledge and skills learned to their jobs. This suggested that while the ACE courses were not identified as vocational, they did have vocational application. Indeed, it appears that many students are now enrolling in ACE courses not identified as 'vocational' with the specific intention of learning vocationally applicable skills and knowledge. Some of the examples cited included floral art being undertaken by occupational therapists for their work with patients, Feng Shui being undertaken by architects, and public speaking/presentation techniques contributing to skills as a workplace trainer. It was also not uncommon for students completing these courses to be granted credit towards further vocational study.

There was a strong view amongst ACE providers and industry representatives that the concept of 'vocational' courses needed to be broadened to encompass the type of learning described above. For the benefit of ACE–mainstream VET linkages, ACE, mainstream VET and industry should consider working together to more clearly define policy in relation to recognition of vocational learning acquired in ACE courses.

Strengths of ACE VET

In this study it became apparent that many of the features which distinguished ACE VET from mainstream VET were the reasons people chose to study with ACE. To many, they were the 'strengths' of ACE VET. Prominent amongst these strengths were flexibility (the ability to provide suitable course times, suitable course levels and adaptable delivery modes), friendliness, and lack of formality. In providing study opportunities which offer these features, ACE is clearly filling a special niche in VET. ACE should not overlook its strengths when planning vocational provision and associated promotional activities.

Future directions for ACE VET

To determine how ACE could best capitalise on its strengths and serve vocational learners, students, providers and industry representatives were asked to indicate the areas of vocational learning they felt ACE should offer. Recurring themes in their responses were that ACE was particularly important to people who, because of previous unhappy study experiences or a long time away from study, would otherwise be unlikely to undertake vocational study, and that ACE courses often acted as a springboard from which people launched into vocational study in other educational sectors, including mainstream VET. Based on results obtained in this study, it is suggested that ACE pay particular attention to the following aspects of ACE provision.

Courses for people affected by industry change

Provision of vocational learning to people affected by industry change is likely to be an increasingly important future role for ACE. With its ease of access and friendly, supportive learning environment, ACE is in a strong position to provide courses for people faced with changes in their work roles, or even redundancy because of decreased demand for their existing skills. In this context, there could also be benefit for all parties concerned if ACE worked closely with Centrelink.

Segmented training

Some commentators noted there was an industry trend towards more segmented learning in which training was broken into series of short courses. Employees and employers were believed to prefer this kind of course because the courses could focus precisely on their needs and so increase the efficiency of training by minimising the time spent and cost. ACE, with its proven ability to provide short, focussed courses, and to design customised training, would be in a strong position to provide training of this nature. However, some industry representatives warned that ACE should ensure that this type of learning was not improperly used by employers and employees to obtain training which met their needs but did not meet industry standards.

Training packages

Teaching of training packages should be considered by ACE as an opportunity to capitalise on some of its strengths. Coming from a background of modular-style training, and with its traditional close relationships with local employers, ACE could be well placed to provide this type of training.

Customised training

ACE, with its recognised flexibility, its ability to work closely with local employers, and its ability to employ industry-based trainers with specialised knowledge, should not overlook the possibility of providing customised training to industry.

Training partnerships

Taking into account the ability of ACE to develop close working relationships with local employers, its strong regional presence, its ability to recruit industry trainers with up-to-date knowledge and skills as trainers, and its established entrepreneurial skills, ACE providers should consider entering into training partnership arrangements with enterprises.

Subject areas

Subject areas which ACE was said to be particularly well suited to provide were management, supervision, accounting, communication, report-writing, networking, conflict resolution, office/business computer packages, and information technology. The value of these subject areas as a means of gaining the interest and confidence of industry in ACE VET should not be overlooked. Successful provision to enterprises in these areas could lead to extension of provision into other areas.

ACE VET information provision

Evidence from this study suggested that individuals and organisations are disadvantaged by lack of information about the range of ACE VET and the possibility of linking it with mainstream VET. In addition, it is evident that linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET are impeded by a lack of awareness and acceptance of ACE VET by mainstream VET.

If individuals and organisations are to be better informed of the existence of ACE VET and the vocational opportunities it can offer, and if linkages between ACE VET and mainstream VET (which contribute to the vocational opportunities) are to be effective, the extent and quality of ACE VET information provision to the community, industry and mainstream VET needs to be improved. Survey results and comments from project participants suggested a number of strategies which should be considered.

Consideration needs to be given to use of the popular media (for example, newspapers, local press, radio, TV), mail, and information provision by direct contact. The Internet, too, with its capacity to be reached by a wide range of potential recipients, is an increasingly important medium. ACE peak bodies, like BACE in NSW and the Adult and Community Education Unit in SA, have an important role to play, particularly where information is to be provided in consolidated form (that is, covering all ACE providers).

ITABs, employer peak bodies, business enterprise centres and unions have commonly indicated a low level of awareness of ACE VET. In view of the significant role they can play in making industry more aware of ACE VET, and their general willingness to do so, they should not be overlooked in any undertaking to improve industry awareness of what ACE can offer. Centrelink, too, which is in touch with large numbers of people who could benefit from ACE VET study, is another body which should not be overlooked. And, on the community front, local governments may be able to relay ACE VET information to their residents.

In presenting ACE VET information to industry and the community, ACE should also give consideration to the mode in which it is presented. For instance, when approaching enterprises, the role of the person contacted needs to be taken into account. In a small business it is likely to be the proprietor who may have only limited knowledge (and possibly interest) in VET, whereas in a large company it may be a training manager whose interest and work is focussed on VET.

The use of case studies to demonstrate how ACE VET can help may prove to be an effective tool in some situations. Other promotional tools which should be considered are 'branding' and the employment of an ACE 'figurehead'. In branding, the 'ACE' acronym would always appear with any ACE VET promotion so that an association between ACE and VET is developed. Furthermore, the acronym and the words 'Adult and Vocational Education' would be incorporated in the enterprise name of any ACE provider to draw attention to the fact that it is ACE. Employment of an ACE 'figurehead'—a high profile person well known to the public—to feature in ACE promotions and become identified with ACE would give ACE a more friendly and recognisable identity.

Pathways, linkages and credit transfer

Pathways and linkages between ACE and mainstream VET are important in that they enable students to move between the two sectors to pursue study paths which are more advantageous to them than study restricted to one sector. However, in their responses and comments, participants in this study indicated there was a number of issues which needed to be addressed. For example, more than half of the providers responding saw availability of linkages and credit transfer as being very limited, some saw mainstream VET as being reluctant to participate to any large extent in linkage processes, and some complained of the demands that linkage processes placed on their time and resources. More than half of providers responding indicated that they had encountered difficulties in arranging credit transfer from ACE to mainstream VET.

The limitations in availability of linkages and associated credit transfer need to be dealt with on several fronts. The concept of linkages needs to be better explained and promoted in both sectors; the ability of ACE to provide vocational training needs to be recognised by mainstream VET; ACE providers need to establish and publicise their status as RTOs (where applicable), and linkage processes need to be streamlined through closer collaboration and better communication between ACE and mainstream VET.

Resolution of many of these matters can be assisted by ACE and mainstream VET peak bodies working together, particularly at policy level. This is taking place to some extent already (for example, BACE and TAFE in NSW have developed the *ACE–TAFE Joint Strategic Plan*) but more needs to be done to make it work effectively.

ACE should complement mainstream VET

When students, providers and industry representatives were asked whether ACE should maintain a complementary role to that of mainstream VET as opposed to a competitive role in which it offered much the same courses and outcomes, general opinion was that ACE should remain complementary. If ACE were to become more competitive, it would risk reduced co-operation from mainstream VET, changes to the special nature of ACE VET that presently makes it so attractive, and reduced traditional ACE management freedom by being more dependent on government funding and more tightly bound by the needs of industry.

To maintain its complementarity, ACE needs to look at niche markets not accommodated by mainstream VET (a task that is likely to become more difficult as mainstream VET establishes its own ACE-like arms providing short focussed courses for industry). One area in which this could be done is through provision of vocational training in regional areas which mainstream VET finds difficult to service. Either ACE could be the sole provider of particular courses or it could act in partnership with mainstream VET to provide local tutoring, mentoring or supervision for students undertaking mainstream VET courses. ACE might also consider focussing on provision of training in the workplace, an area some commentators felt mainstream VET (particularly TAFE) was not fully covering at present.

To remain complementary, ACE should also endeavour to maintain and enhance its distinctive and attractive styles of delivery which set it apart from mainstream VET.

ACE–mainstream VET co-operation and collaboration

Linkages between courses offered by ACE and mainstream VET depend on a number of factors, such as credit transfer, recognition of prior learning and recognition of current competency, but as much as anything, they depend on co-operation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET. The more interaction between the two sectors, the easier it becomes to relate courses offered by one sector to those of the other. If linkages between ACE and mainstream VET courses are to be developed and strengthened, there must be greater co-operation and collaboration between the two.

At sector management level, there can be cross-representation on the respective management bodies to assist in development of policies and strategies. At regional level, there can be meetings and workshops between relevant staff from each sector during which information about courses can be exchanged, local policy and strategies on linkages and linking procedures can be discussed and developed, and through closer association and familiarity, greater trust and goodwill fostered.

At provider level, selected personnel can be designated as linkage contact persons for their organisation, or even for a particular course area to enable personnel or students from the other sectors to contact them for advice and assistance

At all levels, interaction can be initiated between relevant personnel to develop co-ordinated approaches to course provision to minimise unnecessary overlap and maximise opportunities for linking, to develop linkages and linkage procedures, and to develop guidelines for students and provider personnel wishing to access linkages.

Consideration should be given to creating regional co-ordinators operating across clusters of ACE and mainstream VET providers to liaise with providers, disseminate information, co-ordinate meetings and assist with submissions, manage pathways and perform other cross-sectoral duties related to linked courses. With the appropriate personal attributes and training, a co-ordinator could assist in the improvement of communication and rapport across the sectors and provide better continuity in cross-sectoral relationships when staff changes occur.

As part of a co-ordinated approach, a cross-sectoral referral system should be developed in which students who fail to gain entry to a course in one sector (either because classes are full or because the course they apply for is unsuited to their needs or abilities) can be automatically referred to an appropriate course in the other sector.

Consideration should be given to the concept of advertising courses together, particularly where the courses are likely to be complementary. Joint advertising would give better information access to students and in some circumstances might lower costs.

In view of the success of some schemes in which mainstream VET and ACE providers operate from the same campus—particularly in terms of ease of accessing linkages, development of linkages and more co-ordinated course provision—there may be some situations where co-location of ACE and mainstream VET providers on one campus should be investigated.

Concluding remarks

Evidence gained from this research suggests that ACE VET offers a number of features which distinguish it from mainstream VET. One of the most significant is a relaxed and friendly environment that encourages people who are apprehensive about study (and therefore often unlikely to enrol in mainstream VET) to embark on vocational learning. Others include the flexibility of ACE that enables providers to adapt to the needs of enterprises and individuals, and the fact that ACE providers, through local management, are more in touch with the needs of local enterprises and their community.

For ACE vocational study to be of greatest benefit to individuals (and the industries in which they work) it should enable students to move on to further study in other sectors. However, despite the fact that many ACE courses are of a level and standard that should allow students to receive credit towards study in mainstream VET, this does not always happen—students are often unaware of the existence of linkages recognising the compatibility of the courses, linkages may not have been established, or linkages which have been established are not fully acknowledged.

This study has demonstrated that, for the potential benefits of ACE vocational study to be realised, it is important that linkages between ACE and mainstream VET are fully explored and developed, and once established, are recognised by all providers in the two sectors. It is also important that all concerned, especially students, prospective students, provider personnel and industry personnel, are adequately informed of the existence of ACE VET, its scope, its special qualities, and the fact that it can be linked to mainstream VET. To achieve these outcomes, there must be improvement in the promotion of ACE VET and increased interaction between the ACE and mainstream VET sectors.

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Appendix A

ACE vocational education provider questionnaire

NCVER
NATIONAL CENTRE FOR VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION RESEARCH LTD
A.C.N. 007 967 311

ACE-VET LINKAGES

QUESTIONNAIRE: VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROVIDER PERSONNEL

ABOUT THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

For many years, the Adult Community Education (ACE) sector mainly offered courses for hobbies and personal enrichment. Over the past few decades the range of learning offered has expanded to include English for migrants, literacy, numeracy, basic food preparation and other general living skills, many of which may be applied in the workplace.

In recent years this trend towards work oriented learning has continued with ACE now teaching job-related skills through courses in a variety of fields such as computing, business management and retailing. Many of these courses have the potential to be linked with vocational qualifications and with courses offered by mainstream Vocational Education and Training providers such as TAFE and non-government vocational colleges.

This questionnaire is part of a research study to investigate ways in which people could benefit from better linking of Adult Community Education learning with mainstream Vocational Education and Training (VET). By contributing to the study you will be helping shape ACE based vocational learning for the future.

We would be very grateful if you would complete this questionnaire and return it to us in the reply-paid envelope as soon as you can. Should you misplace your reply-paid envelope, you may still return the completed questionnaire at no cost by placing it in a plain envelope addressed to:

Reply Paid 5
NCVER
PO Box 115
KENSINGTON PARK SA 5068 (no stamp required)

Please note:

1. **All information provided in your answers will be treated confidentially and used only for the purpose of this survey.**
2. **Where a set of squares (☐) are shown, only one square is to be ticked, but where a set of circles (○) are shown, as many as apply may be ticked.**
3. **Because this survey is designed for a wide range of respondents you may find that some questions are not relevant to your situation. Where this is the case, just leave them blank.**

In this questionnaire...

VET stands for *Vocational Education and Training*, which is learning undertaken to acquire skills and knowledge needed to perform work. Some examples of VET courses are: accounting, hairdressing, welding, and bar service. VET courses are mainly provided by TAFE colleges, non-government vocational colleges, skill centres, and some large employers.

Mainstream VET providers are organisations which traditionally provide vocational education and training, such as TAFE colleges, non-government vocational colleges, skill centres, and some employers.

ACE stands for *Adult and Community Education*, which is learning provided by community based organisations such as neighbourhood centres and community colleges. Some TAFE colleges also offer ACE. ACE courses used to focus predominantly on hobbies and personal development (like wine appreciation and stress management) and basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. However, in recent years, ACE has increasingly provided work-oriented learning such as word processing, retailing and food preparation as well. Organisations which provide adult and community education are referred to as **ACE providers**.

ACE vocational education is learning provided by ACE organisations that could have some application in the workplace or could relate to mainstream vocational education and training. ACE vocational education may include accredited courses.

Respondent details

1. Name: ....

2. Position: ....

Organisation details

3. Name of organisation ....

4. Primary nature of organisation
   - ☐ Adult community education provider
   - ☐ Provider of non-accredited vocational education
   - ☐ Government funded vocational provider
   - ☐ Non-government vocational provider

   Comment: ....

5. Type of learning offered

   (please tick as many as apply)

   a ○ General non-vocational (eg Internet for seniors, amateur astronomy, public speaking, aromatherapy)
   b ○ Basic skills (eg English as a second language, literacy, numeracy, communication)
   c ○ Non accredited vocationally oriented learning (eg keyboard skills, small business operation, food preparation for invalids)
   d ○ Accredited vocational learning (eg first aid, bookkeeping, airline ticketing, supervision, hairdressing, pastry cook, electrical mechanic)

   Comment: ....

Student and community needs

6. What do you think are the main reasons students undertake vocational education with ACE?

   (please tick as many as apply)

   a ○ Option of bridging to a mainstream VET course
   b ○ Course is at the student's ability level
   c ○ Need to acquire basic employment skills
   d ○ To learn skills for current employment
   e ○ To comply with employer requirement
   f ○ As a step towards self-employment
   g ○ To get a qualification
   h ○ Need to test ability to undertake VET
   i ○ Fill-in study until sure of study goals
   j ○ More suitable course times
   k ○ Better access to course venue
   l ○ Preferred style of teaching
   m ○ Smaller class size
   n ○ Access to childcare
   o ○ More friendly, less formal organisation
   p ○ More social contact
   q ○ Other (please specify) ....

7. What do you think are the outcomes students most commonly gain from ACE vocational study?

   (please tick as many as apply)

   a ○ Gain in basic skills (English language, arithmetic, etc)
   b ○ Gain in work related skills and knowledge
   c ○ Improved prospects of finding employment
   d ○ Changes in employment (find/switch employment, promotion, new responsibilities, higher pay, etc)
   e ○ Improvement in personal attributes (confidence, communication skills, etc)
   f ○ Bridging to further study with a mainstream VET provider
   g ○ Other (please specify) ....

• Please go on to next page

8. Briefly describe changes in any of the following which you feel could make ACE vocational education more valuable to students:

a ACE course information:

b Venue in which ACE course is presented:

c ACE learning facilities (equipment, etc):

d Student facilities (eg childcare, cafeteria):

e ACE course hours:

f ACE course content:

g ACE course presentation:

h Linkages between ACE study and mainstream VET, such as TAFE study:

i Assistance in linking ACE course outcomes with mainstream VET:

j Other:

Cross-sectoral information about ACE and mainstream VET

9. For the benefit of students it can be helpful if mainstream VET staff have knowledge of local ACE providers and ACE courses.

a How would you rate the knowledge of relevant **mainstream VET staff** about ACE vocational courses and associated credit transfer options?

Circle one **shaded** number using this scale

Excellent	Good	Adequate	Poor	Very poor
5	4	3	2	1

b How could these staff be assisted to improve their knowledge of ACE vocational courses and credit transfer options?

c Are there any important information gaps that should receive high priority?

10. In order to inform and assist ACE students, **ACE personnel** need to know how the mainstream VET sector operates and who to contact regarding credit transfer and other matters.

a How would you rate the knowledge of relevant **ACE staff** about mainstream VET and associated credit transfer options?

Circle one **shaded** number using this scale

Excellent	Good	Adequate	Poor	Very poor
5	4	3	2	1

b How could these staff be assisted to improve their knowledge of mainstream VET courses and credit transfer options?

c Are there any important information gaps that should receive high priority?

Please go on to next page

11. Regarding provision of ACE vocational course information in your organisation:

a What information is provided?

(please tick as many as apply)

○ Course listings
○ Time-tabling
○ Course content
○ Credit transfer options and procedures
○ Other (please specify)

○ Little or nothing

b Who provides the information, and in what form (leaflets, in person, telephone, etc)?

12. Please rate how important a role you think each of the following should play in providing information about ACE vocational education.

Circle one **shaded** number for each item using this scale

Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Little importance	Not at all important
5	4	3	2	1

a Government funded mainstream training providers (eg TAFE)
5 4 3 2 1

b Non-government funded mainstream training providers
5 4 3 2 1

c ACE providers
5 4 3 2 1

d Media (newspapers, local press, radio, TV)
5 4 3 2 1

e Mailed promotions
5 4 3 2 1

f Secondary schools
5 4 3 2 1

g Other (please specify)

5 4 3 2 1

Comment:

13. Many employers have only a limited awareness of vocational education offered through ACE providers. How important is it that employers should be familiar with ACE vocational education? (eg to guide employees and gauge competence of job applicants)

Circle one **shaded** number using this scale

Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Little importance	Not at all important
5	4	3	2	1

Comment:

Please go on to next page

Features of ACE vocational education

14. Using the scale provided, please indicate how significant each of the following are as strengths of ACE vocational education which distinguish it from mainstream VET.

Circle one **shaded** number for each item using this scale

Extremely significant	Very significant	Significant	Minor significance	Not at all significant
5	4	3	2	1

a Good physical accessibility.
5 4 3 2 1

b Informal, friendly, non-threatening environment.
5 4 3 2 1

c Minimum of bureaucracy.
5 4 3 2 1

d Often locally managed.
5 4 3 2 1

e Students may enter and leave learning programs easily.
5 4 3 2 1

f Capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of skills needs and backgrounds.
5 4 3 2 1

g Able to respond to special needs of individual students and employers.
5 4 3 2 1

h Able to provide wide range of teaching formats.
5 4 3 2 1

i The trainer is a helper rather than a learning authority.
5 4 3 2 1

j Emphasis on mastering skills and knowledge rather than completing course in a set time.
5 4 3 2 1

k Other (please specify) ....
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5 4 3 2 1

Comment: ....
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Student access issues

15. Some students, such as parents with dependent children and individuals already employed, are unable to match their study schedules to mainstream VET provider programs. It has been said that ACE can sometimes better meet their needs.

a How does flexibility of ACE vocational education provision compare with that of mainstream VET provision?

Circle one **shaded** number using this scale

ACE much more flexible	ACE more flexible	About the same	ACE less flexible	ACE much less flexible
5	4	3	2	1

b Should this feature of ACE be extended and promoted as an ACE benefit?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

16. Postcode analysis shows that businesses and other organisations which pay for people to attend ACE courses are mostly local. Should ACE place a high priority on servicing the needs of individuals and businesses in local communities?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment ....
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Please go on to next page

Pathways and credit transfer

17. Credit transfer enables students who have completed ACE vocational education to have their learning credited as part of mainstream VET study.

a How would you rate the availability of credit transfer from ACE vocational education to mainstream VET?

Circle one **shaded** number using this scale

Extensive	Good	Adequate	Limited	Very limited
5	4	3	2	1

b Are any difficulties being encountered in arranging credit transfer between ACE vocational education and mainstream VET?

☐ Many ☐ Some ☐ Not aware of any

If so, please specify the most serious ones:

c Can you suggest any areas in which credit transfer between ACE Stream 1000 courses and mainstream VET could be of benefit to students?

d Does RPL have any part to play in linking ACE vocational study to mainstream VET?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

If Yes, please briefly explain how:

18. **Pathways** are established or pre-determined links between ACE vocational education and mainstream VET which enable students to continue their studies from one sector to the other.

a Are you aware of any recognised pathways which enable students to move between ACE vocational education and mainstream VET?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

If Yes, please give examples:

b By what process were the pathways developed?

c Have any pathways been specially created for particular groups?

☐ Non English speaking background
☐ Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
☐ Disabled
☐ Women – non-traditional occupations
☐ Other: ……………………………………

If so, please briefly describe one example:

d What future action on pathways is needed?

☐ Create more and/or improve existing ones
☐ No action needed ☐ Can't say

Comment: ……………………………………

Please go on to next page

ACE contribution to key competencies

19. When asked about training needs, employers often mention key competencies like collecting/analysing information, communication, planning/organising work, problem solving and working with others. How well does ACE compare with mainstream VET in teaching key competencies?

Circle one shaded number using this scale

Ace very much better	ACE better	ACE about the same	ACE worse	ACE very much worse
5	4	3	2	1

Comment: ....

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ACE curriculum

20. Please indicate how important it is that ACE should offer each type of course content listed below.

Circle one number only for each item using this scale

Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Little importance	Not at all important
5	4	3	2	1

a General (non-vocational) education such as literacy, English as a second language, and general living skills.
5 4 3 2 1

b Generic vocational education, covering skills and knowledge broadly applicable in the workplace, such as communication, report writing, teamwork, workplace culture and technological understanding.
5 4 3 2 1

c Industry-specific vocational education such as word processing, airline ticketing, bookkeeping, food preparation and landscaping.
5 4 3 2 1

Comment: ....

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21. Should consideration be given to developing credit transfer arrangements for ACE-provided Stream 1000 courses which have vocational application?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment: ....

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22. In terms of certification, to what level do you think ACE vocational education should extend?

☐ Only below certificate level

☐ Certificate

☐ Advanced certificate

☐ Diploma ☐ Can't say

Comment: ....

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23. It has been suggested that ACE providers should extend their curriculums to include mainstream VET programs (eg TAFE courses). How likely are the following outcomes if ACE becomes competitive with mainstream VET in this way?

Circle one shaded number for each item using this scale

Extremely likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Not at all likely
5	4	3	2	1

a Reduction in traditional ACE flexibility due to need to conform to mainstream requirements.
5 4 3 2 1

b Reduction in existing low level ACE vocational education provision.
5 4 3 2 1

c Shift of ACE vocational education focus from needs of learners to needs of industry.
5 4 3 2 1

d Reduction in appeal of ACE to learners who are initially averse to formal study.
5 4 3 2 1

e Increased dependence of ACE on government funding with consequent loss of management freedom.
5 4 3 2 1

f Unnecessary duplication of course provision.
5 4 3 2 1

g Reduced cooperation/collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET providers.
5 4 3 2 1

h Other (please specify).

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5 4 3 2 1

Comment: ....

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24. Taking your previous answers into account, please rate how complementary or competitive you think ACE should be in relation to mainstream VET.

Circle one **shaded** number using this scale

Strongly complementary	Moderately complementary	Neutral	Moderately competitive	Strongly competitive
5	4	3	2	1

Comment:

25. Do you know of any mainstream VET (eg TAFE) programs already offered through ACE organisations? (Please give examples)

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

26. Some industries (eg primary industry) would like more flexible training (eg flexibility in course structure, timetabling, delivery format, venue). Should ACE consider targeting these industry needs?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment:

27. Please indicate how appropriate it is for ACE to offer each of the following forms of training.

Circle one number only for each item using this scale

Extremely appropriate	Appropriate	Neutral	Not very appropriate	Not at all appropriate
5	4	3	2	1

a Training under contract to government (eg traineeships, training for Centrelink).

5 4 3 2 1

b General industry funded training.

5 4 3 2 1

c Customised training under contract to individual companies.

5 4 3 2 1

d Customised training to meet individual student needs.

5 4 3 2 1

e Training at the place of employment – but not on the job.

5 4 3 2 1

f Training on the job.

5 4 3 2 1

g Shared training with mainstream VET providers (eg TAFE college).

5 4 3 2 1

h Is there any other form of provision that should be offered? (please specify)

5 4 3 2 1

Comment:

Please go on to next page

ACE vocational education target groups

28. ACE study (including ACE vocational education) traditionally benefits special needs groups (eg low language/literacy skills, low level of schooling, women, indigenous, disabled, unemployed). This benefit can translate into the removal of barriers to VET study.

a How important is it that ACE make special provision for VET oriented study for these groups?

Circle one shaded number using this scale

Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Little importance	Not at all important
5	4	3	2	1

b Are there any groups that should be targeted for special attention? (please specify)

29. In providing government-funded VET, some ACE providers have focussed on catering for individualised learning for placement and self-referral students from Centrelink and employment agencies which use a case management approach. Should this be a significant focus of the ACE sector?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment:

30. In order for ACE to focus on middle level vocational education it has been suggested that it should raise its profile with small business at local levels. Do you feel this is a goal ACE should pursue?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment:

31. ACE already provides language, literacy and similar learning to **apprentices** who voluntarily seek assistance. Are there any ways in which ACE providers should extend into more formal training for apprentices?

Coordination and cooperation between ACE and mainstream VET

32. In some states mechanisms exist to coordinate ACE and mainstream VET across the various providers.

a Briefly state how, and by which organisation, ACE vocational provision is coordinated in your State.

b How would you rate existing **coordination** in your state/territory?

Circle one shaded number using this scale

Very good	Good	Adequate	Poor	Very poor
5	4	3	2	1

c How could it be improved?

33. It has been said that there is need for greater **cooperation and collaboration** between providers of ACE and mainstream VET, including strategic alliances, sharing and allocation of course provision responsibilities, joint provision of courses, and joint use of resources such as premises, teachers and equipment:

a Do you agree with this view?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

b Could greater collaboration contribute to incorporation of the principles of lifelong learning and learner-centred adult education into mainstream VET?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

c Could greater collaboration help ACE improve its teaching of vocational principles and practices?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

d If you answered Yes to any of the above, what are the most important actions that should be taken to achieve greater cooperation and collaboration?

e Overall, how would you rate the extent of existing cooperation and collaboration between providers in your locality?

Circle one shaded number using this scale

Very large amount	A large amount	Adequate	A small amount	Hardly any
5	4	3	2	1

Comment:

Please go on to next page

34. If greater cooperation and collaboration involves sharing of resources, how would you rate the importance of sharing of each of the following?

Circle one number only for each item using this scale

Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Little importance	Not at all important
5	4	3	2	1

a Premises.
5 4 3 2 1

b Student amenities (eg cafeteria, library, childcare).
5 4 3 2 1

c Equipment (eg computer facilities).
5 4 3 2 1

d Teachers.
5 4 3 2 1

e Administrative staff.
5 4 3 2 1

f Courses.
5 4 3 2 1

g Other (please specify).

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5 4 3 2 1

Comment:..

Provider performance and quality

35. An important issue for the VET sector is how effectively ACE performs as a vocational education provider. Using the scale provided, please give an overall rating of each of the following.

Circle one number only for each item using this scale

Excellent	Good	Adequate	Poor	Very poor
5	4	3	2	1

a Standard of ACE vocational course content.
5 4 3 2 1

b Standard of ACE vocational teaching.
5 4 3 2 1

Comment:..

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36. The VET system is moving towards greater focus on quality systems and standards as a means of regulation and registration of trainers.

a Do ACE providers need to be assisted to understand and meet the standards?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

b Should ACE providers be invited to participate in developing or revising future quality systems and standards?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment:..

Professional development

37. Using the scale provided, please indicate the need for ACE vocational education staff to receive professional training in each of the following areas:

Circle one shaded number for each item using this scale

Very high need	High need	Average need	Low need	Hardly any need
5	4	3	2	1

a Teaching practices
5 4 3 2 1

b Technical subject knowledge
5 4 3 2 1

c Information dissemination
5 4 3 2 1

d Educational management
5 4 3 2 1

e Competency based training
5 4 3 2 1

f Assessment design
5 4 3 2 1

g Working with enterprises
5 4 3 2 1

h Understanding local labour markets
5 4 3 2 1

i Other (please specify)

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5 4 3 2 1

j Other (please specify)

....
5 4 3 2 1

Comment:..

Please go on to next page

Monitoring and reporting of ACE vocational education activity

It has been suggested that establishment of ACE vocational education could be assisted by accurate and consistent reporting of ACE vocational education activity.

38. Taken overall, how would you rate the existing system of collecting and reporting of statistical data on ACE vocational course provision?

Circle one shaded number using this scale

Excellent	Good	Adequate	Poor	Very poor
5	4	3	2	1

Comment:

39. Should a nationally consistent approach to identifying and specifying programs delivered by ACE providers under national VET system arrangements be developed?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

40. To what bodies or sectors should ACE vocational education provision be reported?

(please tick as many as apply)

a ○ Australian National Training Authority

b ○ ACE system (please specify)

c ○ Mainstream VET system (please specify)

d ○ State/Territory government bodies (please specify)

e ○ Federal government bodies (please specify)

f ○ Other (please specify)

Comment:

41. What should be reported?
(please tick as many as apply)

a ○ Quantitative data on ACE vocational education course provision and enrolments

b ○ Developments in pathways between ACE and mainstream VET

c ○ Developments in cross-sectoral course provision

d ○ Developments in strategic alliances between ACE and mainstream VET providers

f ○ Other (please specify)

Comment:

42. Should consistent national usage of terms such as: *ACE provider*, *ACE sector* and *ACE vocational education* be adopted?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment:

Please go on to next page

Strategies for ACE vocational education management and provision

43. Please indicate below whether the following groups or bodies should either be on an ACE vocational education and training board of management or be consulted by the board.

On the board / Consult only

a ○ or ○ Peak Adult Community Education bodies

b ○ or ○ Regional Adult Education bodies

c ○ or ○ Vocational Education and Training boards

d ○ or ○ VET Accreditation boards

e ○ or ○ Industry Training Advisory bodies

f ○ or ○ Regional TAFE institutions

g ○ or ○ Non-government mainstream VET providers

h ○ or ○ ACE providers

i ○ or ○ ACE student representatives

j ○ or ○ Industry associations

k ○ or ○ Employer associations

l ○ or ○ Unions

m ○ or ○ General community representatives

n ○ or ○ Other (please specify)

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o ○ or ○ Other (please specify)

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Comment: ....

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44. What priority (high, medium or low) should be allocated to each of the following strategies for developing linkages between ACE and mainstream VET?

High Med Low

a ☐ ☐ ☐ Cross representation on ACE and VET sector boards of management

b ☐ ☐ ☐ Joint ACE-mainstream VET planning mechanisms

c ☐ ☐ ☐ Joint ACE-mainstream VET working parties

d ☐ ☐ ☐ National round-table conferences of stakeholders

e ☐ ☐ ☐ State round-table conferences of stakeholders

f ☐ ☐ ☐ Development of stronger links with Industry Training Advisory Bodies

g ☐ ☐ ☐ Input from ACE into state training profile processes.

h ☐ ☐ ☐ Identification and coordination of current ACE vocational education provision at local, regional and State levels

i ☐ ☐ ☐ Development of a clearly identifiable national ACE vocational education structure.

j ☐ ☐ ☐ Demonstration of ACE's contribution to VET through relevant data collection

k ☐ ☐ ☐ National coalitions of various stakeholder groups (eg Aboriginal groups, women's groups, unemployed, University of Third Age)

l ☐ ☐ ☐ Information sharing between ACE and mainstream VET

m ☐ ☐ ☐ Establishment of learning pathways by negotiation of credit transfer, articulation and RPL

n ☐ ☐ ☐ Development of policies on shared use of facilities

o ☐ ☐ ☐ Development of policies on sharing of ACE and TAFE staff

p ☐ ☐ ☐ Partnerships between ACE providers and TAFE colleges

q ☐ ☐ ☐ Partnerships between ACE and non-government VET providers

r ☐ ☐ ☐ Other (please specify)

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s ☐ ☐ ☐ Other (please specify)

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Comment: ....

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Please go on to next page

45. Management of ACE vocational education provision:

a How should ACE vocational education provision be primarily managed?

(Choose one)

☐ Nationally uniform system?
☐ State/Territory uniform system?
☐ Locally based system?

b Some specific aspects of the relationship between ACE vocational education and the VET system may be best handled at a particular level (national, state/territory level or local). Please specify the aspects and their levels.

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46. It has been suggested that designated coordinators could work with clusters of ACE and mainstream providers to coordinate activity across the interface between ACE and mainstream VET. Do you agree with this idea?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

If you answered Yes, please indicate which of the following should be part of the duties of a coordinator.

(please tick as many as apply)

a ○ Liaise with the various providers
b ○ Implement a structured administration system
c ○ Coordinate meetings and submission writing
d ○ Disseminate information about course provision and other activities across the cluster
e ○ Coordinate future planning
f ○ Manage curriculum development
g ○ Manage student pathways
h ○ Monitor outcomes
i ○ Other (please specify)
....
j ○ Other (please specify)..
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Comment:..
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47. Can you suggest any incentives to encourage collaboration and cooperation between ACE and VET?

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Accreditation of courses and registration of providers

48. In what ways, if any, do accredited VET courses delivered by ACE providers differ from accredited VET courses delivered by mainstream providers of VET?

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49. If your organisation is an ACE provider, does it offer:

a Accredited VET courses?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

b Non-accredited VET courses?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

50. Should ACE providers of VET be required to be registered as VET providers?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment..
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Resources and funding

51. Funding is allocated to individual ACE vocational education providers on the traditional basis of cost per student contact hour. As a measure it is said to have the effect of restricting flexibility in ACE vocational education, particularly in relation to innovative delivery approaches, RPL, assessment, on-site training, and on-the-job training. Can you suggest a better way of determining and allocating funds for ACE vocational education?

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52. If government funding were available for ACE vocational education (eg from ANTA), what level of importance (high, medium or low) would you attach to funding for each of the following areas?

	High	Med	Low	
a	☐	☐	☐	Delivery of accredited courses
b	☐	☐	☐	Delivery of non-accredited courses
c	☐	☐	☐	Development of curriculum
d	☐	☐	☐	Obtaining of accredited curriculum on licence
e	☐	☐	☐	Costs of provider registration
f	☐	☐	☐	Costs of course accreditation
g	☐	☐	☐	Costs of credit transfer arrangements and RPL
h	☐	☐	☐	ACE vocational education management and administration
i	☐	☐	☐	ACE vocational education research and development
j	☐	☐	☐	Professional development of ACE vocational teaching staff
k	☐	☐	☐	ACE vocational education quality assurance
l	☐	☐	☐	Provision of childcare for ACE vocational students
m	☐	☐	☐	Dedicated VET facilities and equipment
n	☐	☐	☐	Administration staff for ACE vocational education
o	☐	☐	☐	VET-qualified staff
p	☐	☐	☐	Implementation of lifelong learning principles in relation to VET
q	☐	☐	☐	Special funding for equity target groups (eg women, NESB, limited literacy, unemployed, Aboriginals, rural and remote communities)

Comment:

53. Applying for project funds and developing tenders and submissions for service provision, accreditation of courses, and registration as VET providers is time consuming, expensive and taxing on the limited resources of ACE providers. Apart from allocation of funds for these purposes, how else could ACE providers be assisted with these tasks?

54. It is suggested there is a need for increased use of modern learning technologies (such as computer assisted learning and video-conferencing) in rural and remote communities (where ACE plays an important access role). Should there be special allocation of funds to assist ACE staff to learn and implement these technologies?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comment:

55. Sharing of VET resources and funding (including teachers, premises and equipment) could help ACE provide vocational education and training to the standard required for satisfactory linking with training in mainstream VET. How might this sharing of resources or funding be facilitated?

56. It has been suggested that VET clearing houses be established through which all VET providers, including ACE vocational education providers, can view, assess, purchase or otherwise access curriculum products (including Crown copyright and accredited curriculum documents); or can themselves license and offer products they have produced.

a Do you think this is a workable idea?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

b If Yes, how might it be done?

Please go on to next page

Further comments

If you would like to add any final comments about the relationship between ACE learning and mainstream VET please use the space below or attach extra sheets.

Thank you

Thank you for answering these questions. It is hoped the results of this survey can be used for the benefit of students and learning providers in the future. Your contribution is gratefully appreciated.

As stated previously, your responses will be kept confidential. However, to round out our information I would like to speak informally with some of our respondents for a few minutes on the telephone. If you would be willing to allow me to telephone you at a convenient time (day or evening) I would be most appreciative if you would complete the following.

Please note that this information will be kept strictly confidential and used only as a means of contacting you for the purpose described.

Given name (so we know who to ask for): ....

Family name (optional): ....

Telephone number: (........) ....

Best days and times to telephone you:(more than one may be ticked)

Days: ○ Sun ○ Mon ○ Tue ○ Wed ○ Thu ○ Fri ○ Sat

Times: ....

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Appendix B

ACE vocational education student questionnaire

NCVER
NATIONAL CENTRE FOR VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION RESEARCH LTD
A.C.N. 007 967 311

ACE-VET LINKAGES

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE: ACE

ABOUT THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

For many years, the Adult Community Education (ACE) sector mainly offered courses for hobbies and personal enrichment. Over the past few decades the range of learning offered has expanded to include English for migrants, literacy, numeracy, basic food preparation and other general living skills, many of which may be applied in the workplace.

In recent years this trend towards work oriented learning has continued with ACE now teaching job-related skills through courses in a variety of fields such as computing, business management and retailing. Many of these courses have the potential to be linked with vocational qualifications and with courses offered by mainstream Vocational Education and Training providers such as TAFE and non-government vocational colleges.

This questionnaire is part of a research study to investigate ways in which people could benefit from better linking of Adult Community Education learning with mainstream Vocational Education and Training (VET). By contributing to the study you will be helping shape ACE based vocational learning for the future.

We would be very grateful if you would complete this questionnaire and return it to us in the reply-paid envelope as soon as you can. Should you misplace your reply-paid envelope, you may still return the completed questionnaire at no cost by placing it in a plain envelope addressed to:

Reply Paid 5
NCVER
PO Box 115
KENSINGTON PARK SA 5068 (no stamp required)

Please note:

1. **all information provided in your answers will be treated confidentially and used only for the purpose of this survey,**
2. **where a set of squares (☐) are shown, only one square is to be ticked, but where a set of circles (○) are shown, as many as apply may be ticked.**
3. **Because this survey is designed for a wide range of respondents you may find that some questions are not relevant to your situation. Where this is the case, just leave them blank.**

In this questionnaire...

VET stands for *Vocational Education and Training,* which is learning you undertake to acquire skills and knowledge needed to perform work. Some examples of VET courses are: accounting, hairdressing, welding, and bar service. VET courses are mainly provided by TAFE colleges, non-government vocational colleges, skill centres, and some large employers.

Mainstream VET providers are organisations which traditionally provide vocational education and training, such as TAFE colleges, non-government vocational colleges, skill centres, and some employers.

ACE stands for *Adult and Community Education*, which is learning provided by community based organisations such as neighbourhood centres and community colleges. Some TAFE colleges also offer ACE. ACE courses used to focus predominantly on hobbies and personal development (like wine appreciation and stress management) and basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. However, in recent years, ACE has increasingly provided work-oriented learning such as computing, retailing and food preparation as well. Organisations which provide adult and community education are referred to as **ACE providers**.

ACE vocational education is learning provided by ACE organisations that could have some application in the workplace or could relate to mainstream vocational education and training such as that offered by TAFE.

About you and your previous study

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. Age:
   ☐ 15-20 yrs ☐ 21-30 yrs ☐ 31-40 yrs
   ☐ 41-50 yrs ☐ more than 50 yrs

3. Postcode where you live: ....

4. Language you mostly speak at home:
   ☐ English ☐ Other (please specify)
   ....

5. Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent?
   ☐ Yes. ☐ No

6. Do you have a disability, which may affect your ability to work?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

7. Highest level of previous study completed:
   ☐ Below Year 11 ☐ Certificate
   ☐ Year 11 ☐ Diploma
   ☐ Year 12 ☐ Degree or higher

8. Have you previously studied at either of the following?

   (please tick as many as apply)

   a ○ Adult Community Education Centre, Neighbourhood House, WEA or similar:
   Organisation:..................................
   Course:..................................
   Level:..................................

   b ○ TAFE college or similar:
   Organisation:..................................
   Course:..................................
   Level:..................................

9. Your employment:
   a If currently employed, are you employed:
   ☐ under 15 hr/wk ☐ 15 hr/wk or more
   Occupation:..................................

   b If not currently employed, have you:
   ☐ never had regular employment
   ☐ previously had regular employment

About your course

We would like to obtain your views about vocational education undertaken through courses offered by Adult and Community Education (ACE) organisations such as Neighbourhood Centres, Workers Education Associations and community colleges. To do this we are asking you to answer the following questions about an ACE course through which you feel you have gained knowledge and skills applicable to work. The course can be one you are currently undertaking or one that you have recently completed.

10. Name of course:
    ....

11. How far have you progressed through this course?

    ☐ Completed course 19.......(year)
    ☐ Currently undertaking course
    ☐ Commenced but did not continue

12. How do you study this course?

    ☐ By attending classes
    ☐ By other means (please specify)
    ....
    ....

13. What is the length of the whole course:

    ☐ Less than 20 hrs ☐ 21-50 hrs
    ☐ 51-100 hrs ☐ More than 100 hrs

14. Is the course an accredited VET course?

    ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

15. Name of organisation providing the course:
    ....
    ....

16. Is the course provider a registered VET provider?

    ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Please go on to next page

17. How did you find out about the course?

(please tick as many as apply)

a ○ Friend or relative
b ○ Secondary school
c ○ Career adviser (please name organisation)
....
d ○ VET provider (please name organisation)
....
e ○ Centrelink/Job network
f ○ Newspaper, radio, TV or similar
g ○ Other (please specify)
....

Comments:...
....
....
....

18. What influenced you to enrol in a course with an Adult and Community Education provider?

(please tick as many as apply)

a ○ I wanted to get into a higher level course
b ○ I felt the course was the right level for me
c ○ I needed to acquire basic employment skills
d ○ I needed to learn skills for my current job
e ○ My employer wanted me to study
f ○ It could help me become self employed
g ○ It will help me obtain a qualification
h ○ To test my ability to cope with VET study
i ○ To do some study while deciding what to do next
j ○ The course times suit me
k ○ The ACE venue provides better access
l ○ ACE has a better style of teaching
m ○ ACE has smaller class sizes
n ○ ACE provides better access to childcare
o ○ ACE is a more friendly, less formal organisation
p ○ ACE provides more social contact
q ○ Other (please specify)..............................
....

Comments:...
....
....
....

19. What (if any) are the disadvantages to studying in ACE vocational courses?

....
....
....
....
....

20. When you enrolled in this course, what did you ***hope*** the course would achieve for you? (Note: in the next question you will be asked what it ***will*** achieve.)

(please tick as many as apply)

a ○ Gain in basic skills (English language, arithmetic, etc)
b ○ Gain in work related skills and knowledge
c ○ Changes in employment (find/switch employment, promotion, new responsibilities, higher pay, etc)
d ○ Improvement in personal attributes (confidence, communication skills, etc)
e ○ Bridging to further study with a mainstream VET provider (eg TAFE)
f ○ Other (please specify)..............................
....
....

21. Having now studied in the course, what do you think the course will actually achieve for you?

(please tick as many as apply)

a ○ Useful gain in basic skills (English language, arithmetic, etc)
b ○ Useful gain in work related skills and knowledge
c ○ Changes in my employment (find/switch jobs, promotion, new responsibilities, higher pay, etc)
d ○ Improvement in my personal skills (confidence, communication skills, etc)
e ○ Access to further study with a TAFE or other mainstream VET provider
f ○ Other (please specify)..............................
....
....

Please go on to next page

22. How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of the course?

Circle one **shaded** number for each item using this scale

Extremely satisfied	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Most dissatisfied
5	4	3	2	1

a Course information provided	5	4	3	2	1
b Course venue	5	4	3	2	1
c Student facilities (eg childcare, cafeteria)	5	4	3	2	1
d Timetabling of course	5	4	3	2	1
e Structure of the course (how well it was organised or set out)	5	4	3	2	1
f Content of the course (what was taught)	5	4	3	2	1
g Methods by which the course was taught	5	4	3	2	1
h Standard of teaching	5	4	3	2	1
i Learning equipment and materials	5	4	3	2	1
j The skills and knowledge you gained	5	4	3	2	1
k Potential for credit transfer to mainstream VET (eg TAFE)	5	4	3	2	1
l Assistance in linking ACE study to mainstream VET (eg TAFE)	5	4	3	2	1
m Other (please specify)	5	4	3	2	1

If you indicated *dissatisfied* or *most dissatisfied* for any of the above, please specify below any changes which could be made for improvement.
(Use the letters a-m to identify the item referred to)

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23. Mainstream VET (eg TAFE) teachers generally have an extensive background in the field in which they are teaching and often have a teaching qualification as well. Is there a need for ACE course teachers to improve:

a their technical skills and knowledge?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

b their teaching skills and knowledge?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comments:...
....
....
....

About ACE vocational education information

24. How would you rate your knowledge of what vocational education is available from ACE?

Circle one **shaded** number using this scale

Excellent	Good	Adequate	Poor	Very poor
5	4	3	2	1

Comments:...
....
....
....

25. Please indicate how strongly you would prefer each of the following as sources of information about ACE vocational education.

Circle one **shaded** number for each item using this scale

Very strong preference	Strong preference	Moderate preference	Weak preference	Would not use
5	4	3	2	1

a TAFE institutions	5	4	3	2	1
b Non-TAFE vocational training providers	5	4	3	2	1
c ACE providers	5	4	3	2	1
d Media (newspapers, local press, radio, TV)	5	4	3	2	1
e Mailed promotions	5	4	3	2	1
f Secondary schools	5	4	3	2	1
g Other (please specify)................................	5	4	3	2	1

Comments:...
....
....
....

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Please go on to next page

26. Credit transfer arrangements between ACE and mainstream VET providers (eg TAFE) enable students to have appropriate ACE study credited towards mainstream VET.

a Were you aware of the existence of credit transfer provisions before you enrolled in ACE study?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

b Does availability of credit transfer influence you to study with ACE?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

Comments: ....

....

....

....

Strengths of ACE vocational education

27. Sometimes, when ACE programs are provided in a different educational setting to TAFE or other mainstream VET, students perceive the ACE presentation as possessing particular strengths. If your ACE study is provided in a different educational setting, please indicate how important you feel each of the following are as strengths of **ACE vocational study** which distinguish it from mainstream VET.

Circle one **shaded** number for each item using this scale

Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Little importance	Not at all important
5	4	3	2	1

a Good physical accessibility.
5 4 3 2 1

b Informal, friendly, non-threatening environment.
5 4 3 2 1

c Minimum of bureaucracy.
5 4 3 2 1

d Often locally managed.
5 4 3 2 1

e Students may enter and leave learning programs easily.
5 4 3 2 1

f Capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of skills needs and backgrounds.
5 4 3 2 1

g Able to respond to special needs of individual students and employers.
5 4 3 2 1

h Able to provide wide range of teaching formats.
5 4 3 2 1

i The trainer is a helper rather than a learning authority.
5 4 3 2 1

j Emphasis on mastering skills and knowledge rather than completing course in a set time.
5 4 3 2 1

k Other (please specify) ....

....
5 4 3 2 1

Comments: ....

....

....

....

Student access

28. Flexibility of timetabling and other aspects of course provision enable students to integrate their studies with other commitments. If you can, please compare the flexibility of ACE study with that of mainstream VET (eg TAFE).

Circle one **shaded** number using this scale

ACE much more flexible	ACE more flexible	ACE about the same	ACE less flexible	ACE much less flexible
5	4	3	2	1

Comments: ....

....

....

....

What programs should ACE offer?

29. Please indicate how important you think it is that ACE should offer each type of course content listed below.

Circle one **shaded** number for each item using this scale

Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Little importance	Not at all important
5	4	3	2	1

a General (non-vocational) education such as literacy, English as a second language, and general living skills.
5 4 3 2 1

b Generic vocational education, covering knowledge and skills broadly applicable in the workplace, such as communication, report writing, teamwork, workplace culture and technological understanding.
5 4 3 2 1

c Industry-specific vocational education. For example: knowledge and skills in computing, customer services, mechanical technology, and agriculture.
5 4 3 2 1

d Specially designed vocational courses for groups with special needs, such as unemployed people, women, indigenous groups, people with disabilities and people with low levels of language, literacy or schooling).
5 4 3 2 1

Can you suggest any other groups?

....

....

....

....

Comments: ....

....

....

....

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Please go on to next page

30. If you feel ACE should be providing **vocational education**, to what level do you think it should extend?

☐ Only below certificate level
☐ Certificate
☐ Advanced certificate
☐ Diploma ☐ Can't say

Comments:...
....
....

31. Please indicate how appropriate you think it is for ACE to offer each of the following forms of training.

Circle one **shaded** number for each item using this scale

Extremely appropriate	Appropriate	Neutral	Not very appropriate	Not at all appropriate
5	4	3	2	1

a Training under contract to government (eg traineeships, training for Centrelink).
5 4 3 2 1

b General industry funded training.
5 4 3 2 1

c Customised training under contract to individual companies.
5 4 3 2 1

d Customised training to meet individual student needs.
5 4 3 2 1

e Training in the workplace.
5 4 3 2 1

f ACE training in a mainstream VET provider venue (eg TAFE college).
5 4 3 2 1

g ACE training in dedicated ACE venues.
5 4 3 2 1

h Are there any other forms of provision that should be offered? (please specify)
....

Comments:...
....
....

ACE vocational education and training for apprentices

32. ACE already provides language, literacy and similar learning to apprentices who voluntarily seek assistance. Are there any ways in which ACE providers should extend into more formal training for apprentices?
....
....
....

Future development of ACE

33. From your experience of ACE vocational education, how important is it that additional funds should be spent on each of the following?

Circle one **shaded** number for each item using this scale

Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Little importance	Not at all important
5	4	3	2	1

a Better qualified teaching staff
5 4 3 2 1

b Better classrooms/workshops
5 4 3 2 1

c Better equipment
5 4 3 2 1

d Better student facilities
5 4 3 2 1

e Better information provision
5 4 3 2 1

f Other (please specify)...
....
5 4 3 2 1

Comments:...
....
....

Relationship between ACE and mainstream vocational education and training providers

34. The extent of cooperation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET (eg TAFE) is dependent on various factors including regional availability of facilities, regional student needs, state policies, and the goodwill of the parties concerned.

a From your experience, do you feel there is any need for greater cooperation and collaboration between ACE and mainstream VET than presently exists?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't say

b If you answered *Yes*: in which of the following do you feel there is scope for more cooperation and collaboration?
(more than one may be ticked)

○ sharing of premises
○ sharing of facilities (eg cafeteria, library, childcare)
○ sharing of equipment (eg computer facilities)
○ interaction and sharing of teachers
○ interaction and sharing of administrative staff
○ integration and sharing of course materials
○ other (please specify)
....

Comments:...
....
....

Please go on to next page

35. Many people feel ACE vocational education presently complements mainstream VET by supplying training which links with, or otherwise supports it. Others feel that ACE should also be directly competing with mainstream VET providers such as TAFE by supplying the same or equivalent courses. Should ACE remain complementary or compete directly with mainstream VET?

☐ Remain complementary
☐ Compete directly
☐ Can't say

Comments: ....
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36. Please use the space below to add further comments you may have about issues raised in this questionnaire.

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Thank you

Thank you for answering these questions. It is hoped the results of this survey can be used for the benefit of students in the future. Your contribution is gratefully appreciated.

As stated previously, your responses will be kept confidential. However, to round out our information I would like to speak informally with some of our respondents for a few minutes on the telephone. If you would be willing to allow me to telephone you at a convenient time (day or evening) I would be most appreciative if you would complete the following.

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Your given name (so we know who to ask for): ....

Telephone number: (......) ....

Best days and times to telephone you: (more than one may be ticked)

Days: ○ Sun ○ Mon ○ Tue ○ Wed ○ Thu ○ Fri ○ Sat

Times: ....

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